

Now I'm a

DEMON LORD!

Happily Ever After with

Monster Girls

in My **DUNGEON**

5



Author: Ryuyu

Illustrator: Daburyu



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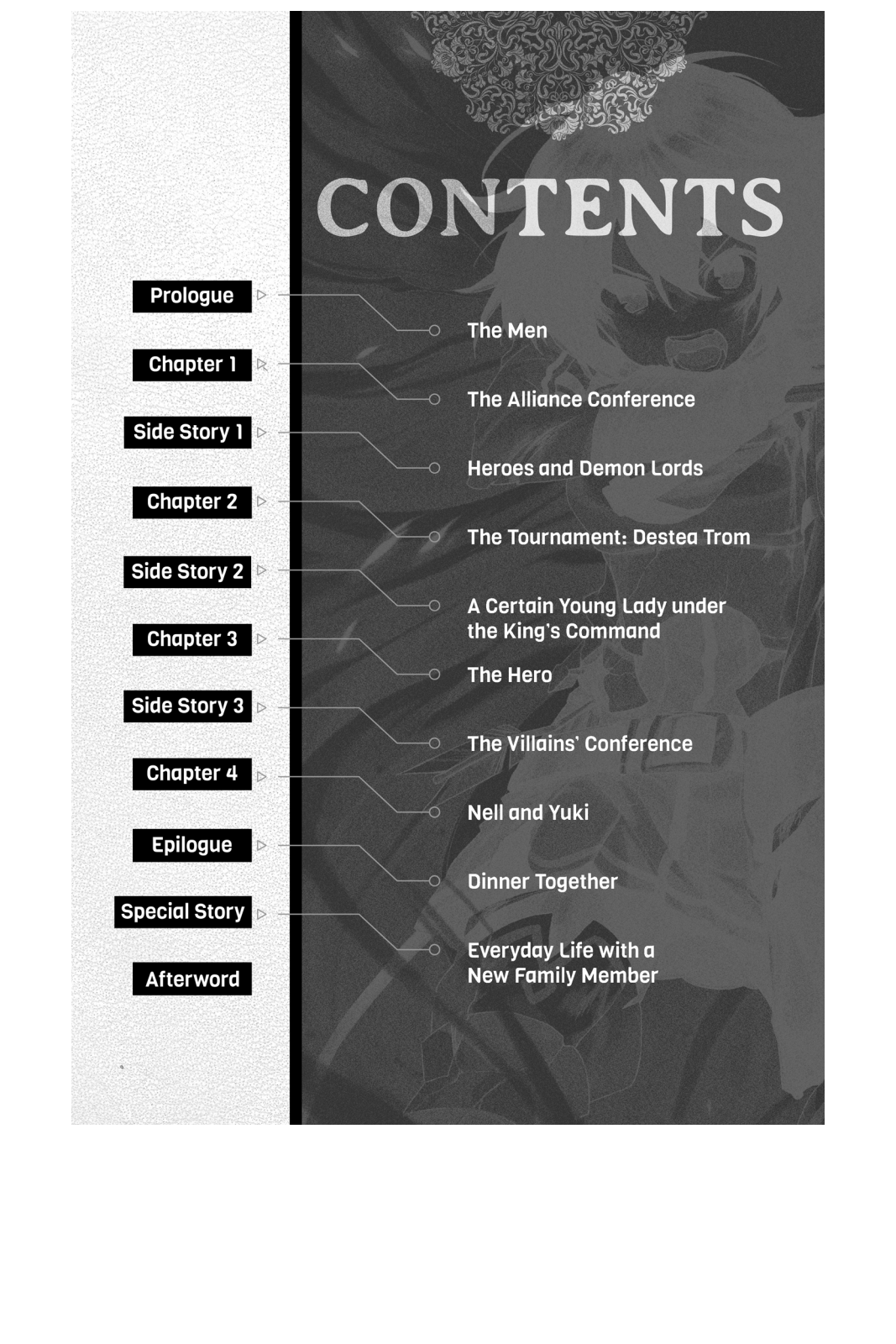
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Prologue: The Men

“Status report.”

“Yes, Lord Derwes. Several of our plans failed to develop as predicted due to the Demon King’s interference, but I believe we managed to acquire ample data regardless. All individual specimens displayed physical changes within minutes of battle commencing. In short, they performed just as we predicted at the outset of this venture. Although personally, I would have liked to conduct more tests to determine the limits of their transformations and capabilities...”

“Routed by the Demon King and his subordinates, eh? Our leader did advise me not to underestimate the enemy, and clearly I would have done well to heed that warning. In any case, what’s done is done, and I certainly won’t be taking them lightly any longer. On that note, we will be abandoning this location, just in case. Make the necessary preparations for our departure. I want you to be thorough in removing all traces of our presence so that we can’t be tracked.”

“To confirm, then, you approve using all of the experimental subjects in the next stage of our agenda?”

The man surveyed the sight before him—countless ranks of artificial Undead—while questioning his superior standing next to him.

“Correct. We have no other choice. We can’t maintain these subjects given that we’re going to evacuate this site, so we might as well put them to good use.”

“A bit of a waste, in my humble opinion. Especially because I still had some research I wanted to undertake before deploying them in actual combat.”

His subordinate was a scientist through and through. Hearing his lament, the man named Derwes smiled grimly and responded.

“Be at ease. You’ll be able to do as much research as you desire in our next base, considering that even these improved versions are nowhere near complete. We still have revisions and improvements to make before we can deliver the perfect weapon to our leader.”

“Understood, my lord.”

“Now, let us hurry. It’s almost time for us to leave. For the sake of our ambition.”

“For the sake of our ambition.”

The men sprung into action.

Chapter 1: The Alliance Conference

Hustle and bustle. Crowds of people. The sounds of laughter and folks hawking their goods.

“Wow...”

Eyes wide with wonder and hand held in mine, En uttered that one word.

“‘Wow’ is right, kiddo. What a festival, huh?”

I made that happy comment because I was so caught up in the excitement and energy surrounding us. Drove of people strolled along the streets, coming and going every which way. Stalls of all kinds manned by folks calling out cheerfully for people to buy their stuff were on either side of us. Glancing at others as they passed by, I saw smiles and delight on their faces. The demon world’s royal capital was definitely in a party kinda mood.

I’d sensed the city growing livelier by the day, but today was something else. Truly a sight to behold. I’d been under the impression that the situation in the demon world hung on a knife-edge, but clearly, a festival was another matter entirely. No tension allowed ‘cause it’d ruin this atmosphere. From what I’d learned of this other world from my time on it so far, recreation and entertainment were extremely scarce, so the occasional event like this festival was particularly important for breaking up the daily monotony of life.

“Lord Yuki, might I presume, then, that it’s your first time experiencing a large-scale event like this?”

“Huh? Weeell, I guess it is, yeah.”

I couldn’t tell Leila I’d been to plenty of festivals like this in my old life, so I sort of twisted the truth when I replied to her. Then, En looked up at me and spoke.

“Master... So many people.”

“There sure are. A lot of them.”

“It’s very...lively.”

“Good times, right?”

“Yes... I’m having fun.”

As usual, her expression didn’t really change all that much, but I could tell easily enough she was thrilled by everything she saw and heard because of the sparkle in her eyes. Seeing her happy made *me* happy, so I couldn’t help but smile.

Let's rewind the clock to two days ago.

"Yuki. I'd like for you to enter a *tournament*."

"A tournament?"

I parroted Fynar the Demon King.

"Indeed. The demon world's *strongest*, particularly the *boastful* ones, will assemble soon here in Leigeghegg and take *part* in a tournament where they can demonstrate *whatever* talents they wish. It's *quite* a massive event, taking place over the *span* of a few days. And *thanks* to this tournament, the city itself will take on a *festive* air."

"Hmmm... Sounds fun, actually."

I wonder if they'll have food stalls and stuff. However they set it up, chances were that I'd be able to show En all kinds of neat things. But still, a tournament to show off your power? He'd said it so casually that I got the feeling the Demon King might've been understating the reality of this tournament.

"Naturally, the *Fiends* will be sending some of their *best* and *strongest* to the tournament, in hopes of *garnering* more supporters for their *cause* through their display of power. Which is *why* I would like *you*, Yuki, to *defeat* them in combat as *spectacularly* as you can. In short, I need *you* to be the *victor*."

"Jeez, you say all that like it'll be a walk in the park. I hate to admit this—hell, it might even be too little, too late—but I'm not all that good at fighting. I don't even know any real fighting techniques or strategies, man. Obviously, I don't plan on losing, and I have every intention of kicking ass and taking names, but I can't guarantee you a win."

'Cause when it came down to it, my fighting "technique" revolved solely around murdering my opponent. Weapons? Dog water at using them. Magic? Same deal. Brute force? Now *that* I could work with. My philosophy was to bulldoze the enemy until I was the only one standing.

When my opponents just happened to be power-fighter types like me, it made the fight that much easier. All we had to do was wallop each other until someone, namely me, won. But if I had to go up against seasoned military fighters or other folks with actual combat theory experience, then I wasn't so sure about my ability to come out on top. *What would I even do in a situation like that? Hmm.* Probably bust out my wings, escape into the sky, and carpet bomb the frick out of 'em. And if my opponent also had wings...I'd deal with that if or when it happened.

"Don't worry. When I had you forcibly *entered* into the tournament as a *contestant*, I used my *authority* as the Demon King to *confirm* the rest of the roster. I didn't see *anyone* stronger than you on it."

You really just do whatever the hell you want, dontcha, my guy?

Hadn't even bothered consulting me first, sheesh.

"Ah, I *almost* forgot. There are actually a *few* individuals you need to be *wary* of, but again, *don't* worry. I'll provide you with the *details* of their weapons and fighting styles *later*."

"Thanks, I guess... Waaait a minute. I think I know what you're up to. While I'm crushing the enemy's fighters in a public venue, you and the others are planning to launch a surprise attack behind the scenes, aren't you?"

"Heh heh heh. You're a *clever* young man indeed, Yuki. Oh, *right*, you have a *mask* to disguise yourself, don't you? Then, *here*, you can have this."

"What is it?"

The Demon King casually tossed a ring at me.

"A magical *device*. If you *wear* it, you can *change* your hair and eye color at *will*. It's a *gift* for you, so *use* it as you please even *after* this situation is *resolved*."

Transformation Ring: When the wearer activates this item with their magic, they can change their hair and eye color at will. Quality: A+.

Ooh, a handy little tool for disguising yourself. Sounded pretty dang promising to me.

"Cool, thanks."

I immediately slipped it onto a random finger on my left hand. Lefi's ring would be the only one on my ring finger, thank you very much.

Now, what colors should I choose? Seeing as this was for a disguise, it was probably best to go for something super flashy. Y'know, a look that was absolutely nothing like my usual appearance. *In that case, I'll go with... Got it.*

I'd thought of the perfect colors, so I pushed my magic into the ring and activated its power. In response, I felt magic working its way into my hair and eyes, which made for an almost tingling sensation. It didn't take long for the transformation to complete, and once it did, a demon maid shuffled over to me and held up a mirror so I could check myself out.

"Woow. This is pretty neat."

I unintentionally let out that remark as I stared at what'd become of me. Silver hair and silver eyes. No more black hair and heterochromatic red and black eyes for me. Combining my new look with fake stats from Camouflage meant I could drastically lower the chances of my true identity as a demon lord being discovered.

While I was admiring myself in the mirror, I heard a small

chuckle.

“Hm? Wanna let me in on the joke?”

I turned around to the source of the laugh—Leila, who was standing a bit behind me—and saw her grinning.

“Oh, it’s nothing, really. I just couldn’t help thinking that you’re now truly a matching pair with Lady Lefi.”

I felt like I’d been smacked by something that’d been staring me in the face the whole time. It took her saying something to make me realize that I’d unconsciously picked silver as my flashy color even though I could’ve gone with red or gold or literally anything else.

“Uhhh... Well, um, I can explain, okay? My mind just associated silver with flashy. I-I wasn’t even *thinking* about Lefi!”

“If you say so, my lord.”

Grr. Stop looking at me with those sappy eyes. I cleared my throat, then cut off the flow of magic into the ring. My hair and eyes went back to their normal colors, after which I turned to face the Demon King again.

“Ahem. Right, then, I’ll do what I can. I won’t promise anything more. When is this tournament, anyway?”

“In *seven* days. But The Four Races Alliance Summit is *set* to take place *four* days from now, which makes your schedule *quite* packed, eh? I’m afraid you’ll be *incredibly* busy for a while, Yuki.”

The Four Races Alliance Summit was Demon King Fynar’s brainchild. It’d be a conference solidifying the military alliance between the elves, dwarves, therianthropes, and demons. Technically, “therianthropes” and “demons” referred to species since so many races fell into those two broad categories, which admittedly made using “races” in the name a bit of a misnomer, but it was certainly an easy name to understand, and that mattered way more than semantics.

Humans, elves, and dwarves had apparently developed separately, which had naturally led them to form their own respective nations. Meanwhile, there were many factions and tribes that fell under the therianthrope and demon umbrellas. Because of the political differences between them, a few would join forces and build their version of states to maintain a semblance of power among each other. This was how they maintained equality, relatively speaking.

Despite demons and therianthropes having smaller populations compared to the other major races, they still had excessively large numbers of subgroups and tribes. The current system of stability had developed in order to prevent disunity and war between all the different groups. Clearly, deciding who was in charge was still an ongoing issue in the demon world.

For the upcoming Summit, I’d be attending as one of Fynar’s supporters. That said, my primary role was as a “friend to all races,”

which put me in both an awkward and mysterious position in a lot of ways. Though I'd attended the informal meeting with the others and gotten to know them a little, I wouldn't be making any official alliances at the event itself. What mattered to Fynar was me being there in the first place. PR and all that jazz, I guess.

"Ah, yes, one *more* thing. I'd like you to *assist* with security at the Summit."

"Sure, I can do that. But why? You think shit's gonna go down?"

I found the request kinda strange considering the strong likelihood that Fynar would have security so tight that not even a mouse could get in without an invitation. Yet here he was, asking *me* to help out. Made me wonder if he expected the enemy to send in their big guns or something.

"Again, you're *much* too clever, Yuki."

The Demon King beamed at me, giving me all the confirmation I needed of my guess. I smiled back wryly at him and spoke.

"Are you expecting some sort of attack?"

"In short, *yes*. Of course, I don't have *definitive* proof, but I *do* know that the enemy has been *quite* active recently. They've become *bolder*, no longer lurking in the *shadows* like they used to. For example, your *encounter* with the artificial Undead. So I have to *factor* in the possibility that they might act *nefariously* at or during the Summit."

"By 'artificial Undead,' you mean that giant thing we killed, right?"

The one I'd taken down with the hero and her friend—the colossus who'd kept adapting as the battle had progressed. Different from the Undead giant I'd fought in the humans' royal capital. That thing hadn't changed at all during our battle.

"Correct. My *apologies* for not providing you with a *full* explanation. That Undead creature was *created* using a forbidden drug we call the *Mana Absorption Drug*. It *forces* the user to absorb *vast* quantities of mana, which temporarily *amplifies* their magical power. The Fiends *somehow* managed to get their hands on it and *develop* it to the point that they can now *produce* biological weapons, which, as I'm *sure* you can imagine, is a somewhat *troubling* development for us. *Especially* because we *ourselves* have encountered a few of those artificial Undead too."

His explanation pretty much matched up with Leila's. Well, everything aside from the Fiends' mysterious modifications. That was news to me.

"You're screwing with me with that 'somewhat,' right? That was the first time I've ever met a fucker who wouldn't die no matter how hard I kicked the crap out of it. You need to rethink your threat level

meter, dude.”

For reasons known only to him, the Demon King found my response entertaining because he grinned happily as he spoke.

“You *know*, Yuki, while my people reported to me how *amazingly* you fought, I can *imagine* it for myself now. They said you fought like a *beast*—like a man *possessed*. Your *outrageous* fighting style *dumbfounded* the enemy’s *intelligence* operatives long enough for my people to *capture* several of them. Thanks to *you*, we were able to *acquire* more information. And a *variety* of it, no less.”

Now that’s a *juicy little piece of info*. It was my first time hearing that while I’d been fighting the Undead thing, Fynar and his people had been waging a behind-the-scenes information war.

“What can I say? I specialize in taking down dumb bastards like...it, I guess. Now I’m curious, though: how did you and your people beat the others you mentioned running into?”

“Well, I can *certainly* tell you that I don’t have any subordinates possessing powerful *holy* magic like your *hero* friend, so we had to *resort* to other means. Through a *combination* of tricks and items, we *somehow* managed to win against *our* Undead opponents.”

Interesting. So he actually has solid countermeasures in place. Not to mention that he knew a hell of a lot more about Nell than I realized.

“Speaking of the hero, she’s a human, but she isn’t your enemy. You’d better not try to eliminate her or whatever.”

“Don’t worry, I’m *well* aware. *Her* enemy is the *same* as ours, after all. Our *interests* are aligned, so I have no *reason* to act against her. You’re free to *accommodate* her however you’d like.”

“I was gonna do that anyway, thanks.”

Nell’s a vital ally to me, especially now. At the very least, I trust her waaay more than this shady SOB. I can count on her to have my back for sure. While those thoughts ran through my head, Fynar... Well, I was *pretty* sure he wasn’t reading my mind, but the way he chuckled and his next comment made me second-guess myself.

“You have a great deal of *faith* in the young hero, *don’t* you, Yuki? I wouldn’t *mind* if you granted *me* that level of trust as well, you know.”

“Not on your life. You, my guy, are sus AF.”

“Ahhh, you *wound* me, Yuki. I have *no* idea why *everyone* I know says similar things about me. Even though I do my *best* to interact with others *sincerely*.”

He definitely wasn’t hurt at all, but Fynar made a big production out of looking super sad, like someone had killed his puppy. I just squinted at him suspiciously in response. I had a feeling that this was why the “everyone” he’d mentioned understood exactly how I felt.

I’m on to you, you freak. I know you’re intentionally being over the top

with the shadiness because you don't want people to figure you out. It was super important for a king to have a strong personality and be a force of nature worthy of the position, of course, but this dude didn't even *try* to rein it in. He was going balls to the wall with it, making himself stand out even more. That, I suspected, was the reason he was the blackest of the Blackhearts.

"In *any* case, there you have it. We'll *both* be *quite* busy in the coming days, but I'm *counting* on you regardless, Yuki. Now, then, I'll let *Haloria* handle the details."

And that was how I found out about my upcoming tasks. Considering that my official debut was still a ways off, I decided to go sightseeing in the demon world since I had nothing else to do but twiddle my thumbs while I was on standby. Which brought us back to the present.

"All righty, En, is there anything in particular you wanna see or do? Don't be shy! Tell your old man whatever's on your mind!"

I spoke to her all animated-like as we walked, the two of us still holding hands. I was practically falling off my demon world wallet—courtesy of the Demon King, of course—so I could very much afford an all-you-can-have-fun buffet.

"Anything...?"

"Yup, anything!"

"So much to do... I don't know what to pick."

En frowned thoughtfully and looked everywhere around us. Watching over us from just a step behind, Leila smiled wryly.

"Lord Yuki, it seems you're enjoying yourself tremendously, hm?"

"Hell to the yes I am! I mean, it's a festival! Who *wouldn't* have fun at a festival? Losers, that's who, and I ain't no loser."

I'd loved festivals in my previous life on Earth; just being at one had been enough to lift my spirits. Like, what other event had such a unique, awesome vibe that automatically made you excited about everything? This being En's first experience with one, I wanted her to savor the indescribable fun to be found at such celebrations.

Fiddlesticks. I wish the others could have been here too. I would've loved to see Iluna, Shii, and the wraith sisters enjoying the festivities with us.

I wouldn't get too down in the dumps about it, though, because this festival in the demon world wasn't the be-all and end-all of entertainment. I was sure this world had even more fun events to offer. As long as we were alive and kicking, we'd have plenty of opportunities to enjoy fun stuff like this—next year, the year after, and every year after that. The next time I had fun like this, it'd be with everyone. I'd make it happen one way or another.

That reminds me. I still didn't know why Lefi had decided not to tag along on this trip to the demon world. She'd said the timing was bad, but all she did at home was veg out anyway, so what the hell did that even mean? *Curiouser and curiouser.*

"Hmm. Guess I'll just ask her straight-up when we get back. So, En, what's the verdict?"

"I...want to try that."

"Excellent! Wait. Uh, Leila? What is that?"

After deliberating for a long time, En had finally made her choice and pointed at a stall mobbed exclusively by kids. There, I saw a floating ball of light set up as a target, with players aiming what seemed to be magic bullets of some sort at it through a hole in a square box. All the kids playing were having a blast trying to hit the thing.

"The objective of this game is to use magical tools containing a certain amount of magic and aim the projectiles at the target, the ball of light, which is created using illusion magic. The tools can be made from relatively inexpensive parts, so you're likely to find at least one stall of this kind in such venues."

Aha! Just like the target-shooting game you'd find all the time at fairs and stuff back on Earth. Except this world's version of the game had the target constantly moving. Plus, it was super in-your-face with how showy the ball was, so it looked way more fun than the carnival shooting games I knew from my old life. *Other world, you always keep me on my toes.*

"Okay! Let's play!"

"Yay...!"

Just as me, En, and Leila were about to really start getting our fill of this festival, I heard a familiar voice not too far away.

"Three of these, please, mister."

"Comin' right up, missy!"

Hey, I know this voice. I wove my way through the crowd toward the food stall where she was buying skewers of grilled meat. When I got close enough, I saw that she had her hood pulled up. I tapped her on the shoulder and greeted her.

"Sup, Nell? You doing the tourist thing too?"

"Hnn? Ah, Mishtah Hugi!"

Her mouth stuffed with meat, the young hero Nell turned around and looked up at me in surprise.

"That's me. Mishtah Hugi, at your service. Three meat skewers just for you, eh? Damn. You sure can eat, little lady."

"Huh? N-No! Um, you have the wrong idea! O-Of course I can't eat three of these all by myself!"

She quickly swallowed what was in her mouth and waved her free

hand in a panic, denying my claim.

“Y’know, I highly recommend that, at the very least, you be honest with *yourself*. As a fellow meat lover, I have nothing but support for you gorging on it like a glutton.”

“I agree with Master... Meat is yummy, so I always want to eat a lot of it too.”

“L-Like I said, you have the wrong idea! You too, En!”

“Huh...? So you don’t think meat is yummy?”

Nell rushed to soothe En, who looked a little sad now.

“No, uh, I didn’t mean it like that. Meat is incredibly delicious. It is. So much so that I unthinkingly wind up devouring large quantities of it...”

“Good... Then you’re a meat lover too, just like me and Master.”

“R-Right... You know what? I give up. I’m a meat lover too.”

The more En unintentionally manipulated Nell into admitting the truth, the harder I laughed. After a while, my howls died down into chuckles, and with a slightly serious expression, I spoke again.

“So, any new developments on your end?”

The look on Nell’s face went from wry to grave at my question. Except I struggled a bit to take her seriously because she was still holding on tightly to her other meat skewers. They smelled freaking delicious.

“Yes, a minor one. After we took into account the information you provided, we hit upon some powerful people who would be willing to parlay with us, so I may be leaving the demon capital for a bit soon.”

Once we’d left the pub and gone our separate ways a little while ago, we’d met up again a few days later to exchange information. I’d used my white half of the Comm Orb pair to signal to her. That day, I’d told her what the Demon King had told me about the giant Undead monster, as well as more details about the hostilities among demonkind. In particular, I’d given her info about the demons who still kept the Fiends at arm’s length, not taking sides in the conflict.

As for what Nell had told me... Well, I couldn’t really have expected her to have as much intel on the situation as the Demon King, so instead, I’d asked her to give me details on the moves she and her people were planning to make in the near future. She’d said they were busy trying to form relationships with influential demons who would at least support neutrality against humans. They weren’t averse to the possibility of friendly demons going a step further and forging alliances with them either. In short, they were basically doing the same thing the Demon King was, albeit on a much smaller scale than him since he was involving so many other races.

“Got it. I know I don’t have to tell you this, but I’ll say it anyway: be careful. It’s so unstable in the demon world right now that we were

attacked by bandits on our way here. If we're talking about extremes, you might even run into another Undead creature. I know you're a powerful hero, but even *you* can't do a ton all by yourself."

From behind me, I heard Leila muttering to herself. Something along the lines of, "A bit rich coming from someone who's always charging in recklessly, thinking he can handle things alone." I pretended not to hear her, though.

"Understood. Thank you for your concern. Anything new from you, then?"

"Nah, nothing right now. But things are gonna get a lot more hectic once the Summit finally kicks off."

"Yes, I'd imagine so, especially with the grand proclamation announcing it. You know, I really would have liked seeing you fight in the tournament, Mr. Yuki. It's unfortunate that I'll be gone during that time..."

"Ha ha! Well, in this case, work is work for both of us, right? No sense crying about it. Oh, right, Nell, I just remembered."

"Hm? What is it?"

Her guard clearly down, I took advantage of the opening and gobbled up the meat on one of her half-eaten skewers.

"What?! M-My meat!"

"Mmm! That was good! The sauce adds juuust the right amount of flavor; it's not too much but not too little either. A pity that the meat itself is a bit on the tough side, making it hard to snack on while you walk around. Overall, this food critic rates it a seventy!"

"Honestly, your audacity knows no bounds! Especially when you ate it without my permission!"

"Mwa ha ha! Time to run for our lives, En, Leila!"

Thrilled by my successful prank, I booked it with my little entourage, giving the hero a lazy wave of my hand. I heard Nell huff angrily as she watched us leave, but I didn't miss the hint of laughter in her expression either.



Places like this—ones with huge crowds—made it easy for people to run into someone they knew.

"L-Leila?!"

Not long after we split up with Nell and went back to enjoying the festivities, we suddenly heard someone shout Leila's name. The three of us turned around to face the owner of the young-sounding voice.

"I-I knew it! I knew I recognized that countenance as yours, Leila! Are you safe?! Are you well?! I can hardly believe I'm seeing my beloved big sister again!"

She turned out to be a young girl with sheep horns. Dressed in a

huge robe that practically swallowed her tiny frame, she was only a little bit bigger than En. As far as appearance went, she could have been an older elementary school student or just about to start junior high. Her mouth hung open in shock and she stared so fixedly at Leila that I was worried she'd bore a hole through my maid.

Speaking of my maid, she responded with her usual relaxed, nonchalant attitude.

“Oh my. Emyu, what a lovely surprise. How long has it been since we last saw each other, hm?”



“You know her, Leila? I mean, you must, since she called you her ‘beloved big sister.’”

“Indeed I do. Though we’re not technically related, I dote on her like I would a younger sister. I taught her a great many things back at my old home.”

I found it fascinating to get this glimpse into a side of Leila I didn’t know, especially her relationship with this young girl. *Her old home...* She must’ve been referring to her life before humans had enslaved her, right?

Before I could dig any further, though, Emyu, the little girl, rushed over to Leila’s side, clearly overcome with emotion. But she stopped running and let out a gasp when she finally saw me and En standing next to the woman she considered an older sister.

“Wh-What in the world?! L-L-Leila, wh-wh-when did you have a child?! And why are you wearing a maid uniform?!”

Emyu stared at us in utter confusion. She probably thought my little girl was *our* little girl. Not wanting her to be wary of us, I spoke to her soothingly.

“So you’re Leila’s little sister, huh? Let’s take it easy and—”

“Y-Y-You scoundrel! N-Not only did you steal her chastity and defile her to kingdom come, but you must further her humiliation by forcing this maid sham on her?! What kind of horrible man are you?!”

“Yo, Leila, a little help here? Your sis here is apparently operating under a serious misconception.”

“Um... My apologies, Lord Yuki. This child has quite a rich, active imagination, you see,” Leila replied with a faintly amused smile on her face.

A rich, active imagination, huh? Well, that’s one way to describe it.

“A-And upon closer inspection...this *man* is the lord of a labyrinth?! A demon lord?! Wh-Wh-Wh-Why is a demon lord even here, of all places?!”

My attempt to calm Emyu down failed spectacularly as she backstepped away from me in a flash, her guard way up now. For some reason, the little ankle-biter reminded me of a kitten, hissing angrily while its fur stood on end.

“Heh, you figured me out. Good job. Hey, Leila, refresh my memory. You knew right away that I was a demon lord the first time we met too, yeah?”

“Indeed, Lord Yuki, I did. Our race specializes in Analysis and perception.”

Whoa. As far as I was aware, Leila shouldn’t have had special abilities like the one she’d mentioned. Then again, this was Leila we were talking about, so it didn’t surprise me to learn that she was good

at detecting information like that even without having the ability itself. Which meant this kid would have the same talent since they were members of the same race. Her capacity for Analysis seemed a bit less developed than Leila's, though.

"Grr! I'd wager that you succumbed to his violation because of his overwhelming power as a demon lord, didn't you, Leila? A-And on top of that, he has clearly forced you to serve him day after day after day as his maid even though you hate it. He probably coerces you into his sleeping quarters every night for more *service* despite your exhaustion from your daily work too. Oh, how awful your suffering must be, my beloved sister!"

Ay yo, what the actual fuck? Her imagination was getting more "rich" and "active" by the second. I didn't know whether I should be impressed or appalled. Also, wow, who was she even basing this scumbag sex offender off of?!

"You're...very rude."

Looking kinda mad, En assertively planted herself in front of me.

"Wh-What did you say?! Th-This has nothing to do with you!"

"It does... Because he's my master."

En pointed firmly at me before continuing.

"And I'm not Leila's child... She's my friend."

Next, she pointed at Leila.

"Huh?! I-I...see? So you're not the offspring of that demon lord and Leila?"

"That's right... Also, Master doesn't do bad things like you said."

En folded her arms imposingly and harrumphed forcefully. *Aww, she's all angry for me. What a cutie.*

"N-Nevertheless, he *is* a demon lord? Imbeciles loyal only to their own desires, the entire lot of them. Not a shred of intelligence to be found amongst them, you know. So the fact that this particular demon lord is able to hold on to his wits even when faced with Leila's stunning beauty is preposterous."

She was right about me being loyal to my desires and Leila being a stunning beauty, so I'd give her points for those two. Wrong on all other counts, though. If I ever made a move on Leila, Lefi would turn me into smoldering charcoal, and that'd just be the start. She'd follow it up by using restorative magic to bring me back to life, only to tear me limb from limb, slowly and painfully, before burying the pieces of me somewhere super deep within the Demonic Forest. Just the thought of her wrath was enough to deter me, so thanks but no freaking thanks to all of that.

Another thing Leila's little sister wasn't aware of was that *all* my dungeon residents had the looks to put top idols to shame, not just Leila. No cap. If my ladies ever decided to put together an idol unit of

their own, they'd be unstoppable and invincible. You could take *that* to the bank.

The demon lord becomes the group's producer, and thus begins his long series of never-ending battles to transform his idols into the world's greatest unit.

"Hmph... Master's not like that."

"She's right, Emyu. You're being extremely rude right now and I won't stand for it. I'll have you know that Lord Yuki is not only my savior, but he has also graciously allowed me to remain at his side."

"L-Leila?! He's brainwashed you too?!"

I jolted out of my daydream when I heard Leila firmly scold Emyu, who stared at her, dumbfounded. The girl was honestly pretty entertaining to watch because, unlike En, she had an incredibly expressive face.

"B-But if what you're saying is true, th-then I was wrong about all the things I imagined he did to you. That would mean I've been unspeakably disrespectful this whole time. I'm very sorry."

Accepting her blunder unreservedly, Emyu humbly bowed her head at me in apology. *Don't worry, kid, I like honest people like you.*

"It's all good, squirt. You were just worried about your big sis, werentcha?"

"Yes, indeed. I'm so sor— 'Squirt'? Did this man just call me 'squirt'?! Grr! In the end, a demon lord never changes his stripes! Your kind is the enemy of all intelligent beings! I'm *not* a squirt, thank you very much! I'm still growing! And someday, I'll have the same nice hourglass figure as Leila does! With a full bust and derriere too!"

"Hmph... Master's enemies are my enemies."

"Challenge accepted! I'll trounce you too! Anyone who allies themselves with a demon lord is *also* my enemy!"

Emyu stepped threateningly toward En, who growled cutely and took up a fighting stance even though she didn't have a sword or anything. I chortled while I watched the two of them bicker, then spoke up.

"All right, let's take a chill pill here. It's almost dinnertime, so how 'bout we call a truce and grab a bite to eat?"

We were sitting outside on a terrace.

"I-I see... So that's what happened..."

Emyu, the sheep-horned girl, stopped eating for a second and commented thoughtfully. I'd bought food for all of us, including her, at the food stalls.

"I worried you a great deal, didn't I, Emyu?"

"N-Not at all! It's nothing compared to what you went through, Leila," she responded to her big sister, waving away her concern with

her hand. “But...does this mean you won’t be returning to the Academy?”

“Correct. I was quite bored—I mean, the Academy is quite an insular environment. It’s perfectly fine as a learning institution, but I think it unsuitable for higher-level research, you see. Hence I intend to stay with Lord Yuki for a while longer.”

Leila had definitely said she was bored before she’d cut herself off, right? I hadn’t heard her wrong, had I? She normally kept her cards close to her chest, so it kinda blindsided me to hear her really speak her mind about the Academy. *Huh. She’s surprisingly aggressive, isn’t she? Today I learned yet another new side of her. The hits just keep on comin’.*

“Understood. I’ll inform those evil old hags of your decision, so you don’t have to worry about that end of things!”

“Tee hee. Thank you very much, Emyu.”

Her face full of affection, Leila gently stroked the girl’s head. Didn’t take a genius to figure out that these not-actually-sisters had a strong relationship. Seeing them made me realize that Leila had probably always been so good at taking care of my dungeon’s little girls because she’d looked after Emyu.

“Tell me to butt out if I’m overstepping, but are you sure you don’t wanna go home at least once, Leila? I mean, there’s gotta be other folks who are worried about you, right?”

I knew next to nothing about the makeup of her family, but I figured parents had to be in the picture. Actually, maybe not, considering how small her community sounded from what little she’d revealed about herself since coming to live in the dungeon. Even without any blood relatives, though, she at least had to have people who cared about her. *I hope, anyway.* Which was why I thought it might not hurt for her to drop by for a bit, just to show them she was alive and well.

“You don’t need to concern yourself about that, my lord. Once members of the ovine race are old enough to understand the world around them, each is free to live their life at the behest of their individual inquisitive natures. That’s the kind of race we are, after all.”

“So basically, you’re saying that people like you aren’t uncommon in your tribe?”

“Indeed. This one is still quite young, so she’ll be living in our village for a few more years still, but there are many others like me who have already left our home behind. If anything, I would suggest you encourage Lew to make a trip home.”

“Huh? Lew?”

Why the heck is she suddenly talking about our klutz of a maid? And

why here, of all places?

“Because Lew was captured by humans immediately after running away from her home. It’s very likely that her parents are worried sick about her, hm?”

“Wait, what? I had no idea. Are you serious?”

“Oh, dear. It seems I forgot my promise to keep quiet about her situation. Well, what’s done is done, I suppose.”

Leila’s slightly dismayed expression seemed to say, “I’ve done it now.”

Well, shit. Lew’s a runaway? Thinking back on our very first interaction, I could vaguely recall her saying something about her family being against her leaving and that she’d prove herself.

“Damn. That’s bad. Maybe I *should* force her to go home, even if it’s just the once.”

“I suspect she’d be highly resistant to the idea, given how she begged me to keep quiet about it. Even so, I firmly believe you should at least discuss the matter with her upon our return.”

“Okay, will do.”

I thought about how her parents might feel in this situation—their daughter’s whereabouts unknown, only to learn when they reunited that she’d been working as a maid for some random guy. If it were me, I’d probably kill the guy without a second thought. I definitely didn’t need to be making enemies out of her family, so I’d for sure be having a good, long talk with her once I got back to the dungeon.

“In any case, demon lord, I thank you for rescuing my sister! But! If you make her cry or do anything to hurt her, I’ll kill you myself! Remember that!”

“Noted. And now that we both know where we stand, you might wanna do something about that sauce you’re dripping, Leila’s little sis.”

“Huh? Eeeek! My robe!”

While she’d been busy threatening me, the sauce from the grilled corn-like food she was holding had oozed onto her clothes with a *splat*.

“Emyu, dear, get a hold of yourself, won’t you?”

Shaking her head in fond exasperation, Leila pulled out a handkerchief and blotted at the stain.

“L-Leila! S-Stop treating me like a child! I-I can clean up my own mess!”

“I’ll stop treating you like a child when you start paying attention to your surroundings.”

I couldn’t help laughing out loud as I watched their exchange. Warmed the cockles of my demon lord heart, it did.

“D-Demon lord, cease and—”

“Emyu, that’s not his name. You may address him as Lord Yuki.”

“Grr... Fine! Y-Yuki! Why are you laughing?!”

“Oh, you know, just thought it was great how you two get along so well. Right, En?”

“Yes... They’re like you and me, Master.”

“Yeah, good comparison.”

Pleased, I ruffled En’s hair. This kid always said the cutest things. Then, I remembered something.

“So, I probably should’ve asked earlier, but better late than never. What’re you here in Leigeghegg for, Emyu?”

“To watch the tournament, of course. This huge festival is held every year, making it the perfect opportunity to see many wondrous things one has never seen before! I’ve always wanted to experience it for myself, so I decided to attend this year. And I’m even happier since I got to see Leila too!”

“Emyu, please don’t tell me you came alone?”

“I did, but it’s fine! My evil old hag of a teacher gave me several protective talismans!”

Wanting to ease the worry she heard in her big sister’s voice, the young girl rummaged around inside her robe and pulled out several paper charms.

Counteroffensive Talisman: In the event the bearer is attacked, this talisman turns the attack back on the attacker and amplifies it. For sole use by Emyu. Should any other individual attempt to use this talisman, they will incur lethal damage. Quality: A+.

Barrier Talisman: In the event an enemy intrudes within a fixed radius of the bearer, this talisman notifies the bearer of the hostile presence. For sole use by Emyu. Should any other individual attempt to use this talisman, they will incur lethal damage. Quality: A+.

Sacrificial Talisman: In the event the bearer suffers lethal damage from an attack, the attack is rendered ineffective, lasting for a maximum of three attacks. For sole use by Emyu. Should any other individual attempt to use this talisman, they will incur lethal damage. Quality: A+.

Whooooaaa... Deadass, these talismans were pretty nuts. No wonder

this little girl had been able to travel this far all by herself. With powerful protection charms like these, she could rest pretty dang easy knowing how safe she was.

“Your teacher made these? Then your safety is indeed guaranteed, hm? Still, we ourselves will be staying in the capital for a while longer, so if anything happens, don’t hesitate to rely on us, all right? For your reference, we’re residing in that castle over there.”

“Understood, Leila! The castle, yes— The castle?! The demon world’s *royal* castle?!”

“Correct. Lord Yuki was invited by the Demon King, and I have been graciously allowed to accompany him on his trip.”

“I-I see... Th-This man is...”

“Think better of me *now*, kiddo?”

When I grinned teasingly at her, Emyu turned away from me with a huff.

“N-No, I don’t! That’s certainly not enough for me to accept you as a suitable partner for my big sister! Only a real man who devotes himself ceaselessly and diligently to becoming the best of men befits someone of her station!”

“Ha ha! If that’s what it takes, then I guess that’s what I gotta do.”

With a laugh, I chomped down on my own food.

“Ooh, who’s this tomcat I spy? Yuki, is that you?”

Out of nowhere, I heard a voice calling out to me from behind. That distinctive manner of speech meant it could only be... I already knew the answer, so I wasn’t surprised to see cat ears when I turned around.

“Reunions galore today, huh? Sup, Naiya? Fancy meeting you here. Millé and Ruène aren’t with you?”

Yup, it was Naiya, the cat woman I’d met on the carriage trip to the demon world’s capital.

“They’re off chasing their own tails today. It’s not like we mollies do everything together, you know.”

Fair enough.

“More importantly, did you get a chance to show your whiskers at the guild yet, Yuki? I’m friendly with the staff there, so I told them to give me a yowl if a man with a kitten visited, but I haven’t heard so much as a hiss from them about it.”

While Naiya chattered, she wrapped her arms around my neck from behind and leaned against me playfully. A feminine scent tickled my nose. *No worries, I got this.* Mostly because her *blessings* were meager, just like Lew’s and Lefi’s, so her pressing her body into mine didn’t affect me. Much.

It wasn’t my fault, though, okay? Turning down temptation every single freaking time took its toll on a guy. I’d never once claimed to be

a saint. *Any* healthy young man would be in danger when confronted by a cat girl literally within touching distance. But I was in control. Mostly, anyway.

So, Miss En, if you could please stop stabbing me with your eyes, I'd really appreciate it. What made it more uncomfortable was the fact that she was sitting right next to me, which meant I had no escape from that sharp stare of hers.

"Uh, well, I actually dropped by at one point. But honestly, it was so aggressively run-of-the-mill that I didn't stay long."

There was no lie in my words. I *had* dropped by the adventurer's guild in the demon world, and it was just a normal office-type environment. The building itself was huge and had been pretty busy with people doing their thing. Frankly speaking, though, the atmosphere and interior had been pretty dull compared to the humans' adventurer's guild. I hadn't found it even a little bit appealing, so after a quick peek inside, I'd bounced.

"Meah ha ha! You're right, there's not much in there to catch any cat's eye. Hmm... Ah, I just thought of the purrfect thing, Yuki. Why don't I show you someplace a lot more *fun*, just the two of us? I'm pawsitive you'll enjoy—"

"No..."

With that declaration, En grabbed my arm and tried to drag me out of Naiya's hold.

"Demon lo— Y-You cad! To behave so sh-shamelessly even though you have Leila! How could you?!"

Her face flushed for some reason, Emyu glared daggers at me. *She's too pure and too far gone for this world at the same time.*

"What she said, Master... You're trying to commit adultery even though you have me. I won't let you."

"Um, Miss En? I think your train of thought might have derailed. Also, you're wrong about the adultery part. I have zero intention of cheating. None whatsoever."

"But...it looked like...you were trying not to smile."

"N-No? No, you're wrong. Let the record show that I *strongly* reject any accusations of infidelity or attempted infidelity in this instance!"

When I freaked out and just started saying whatever popped into my head without actually thinking about it, Naiya purred and grinned like a Cheshire cat.

"Meah ha ha! Ever the popular tomcat, Yuki!"

"G-Goddammit. Whose fault do you think that is, you little..."

I scowled at her before clearing my throat and continuing. I tried hard to sound smooth and unaffected.

"Um, anyway, I appreciate the invite, but I actually don't have a lot of free time these days. Even if I did, though, I'd still say no

because my wife would kill me if I said yes, so cut me some slack, would ya? For whatever reason, she's got a strong sense of smell, and she'd sniff me out in a heartbeat. So I'm sorry, but it's a no go, okay?"

"Fur real? That's too bad. I'll tell you a little secret, though, Yuki: I was actually just pulling your paw. I'm busy too."

"I... You... No more jokes like that, please. I prefer to *not* get my ass kicked for no reason."

"Impawssible. You're easy prey, Yuki. You have no idea how fun it is for me to swat at you!"

Huh. I don't think anyone's ever said that to me before.

"Naiya... I won't hand over my master to you."

"Meah ha! Aww, how unfortunate. I guess I'll take that as a sign to make my exit. See you around, playboy!"

She unwound her arms from around my neck, cheerfully rubbed En's head, and gave me a saucy wink before melting into the crowd.

"What the hell, man? I feel like I just got my shit rocked by a storm or something."

"Tee hee. She certainly is a softening presence, hm, Lord Yuki?"

"Yeaah, I'm gonna have to disagree with you on that..."

Based on what I'd just seen, there was nothing soft about the chaos she created. Although I couldn't deny that she definitely knew how to liven a place up.

"Goodness, Master... The second I take my eyes off you, you're ready to be unfaithful."

"She's right! I was on the mark about demon lords being loyal only to their desires! And in your case, that includes those of a carnal nature, you pervert! I can't let Leila remain in the hands of a deviant like you!"

"I have a lot to say to all of you and I don't really know where to start. But before I do, I suggest you eat before your food gets cold."

And that was how we wound the day down with dinner. After we finished our meal, we went back to wandering around the city and enjoying the festival. Once it got dark, the three of us escorted Leila's little sister back to her lodging, then headed to our own in the Demon King's castle.

I didn't know it at the time, but Emyu and I would meet again in a strange, unexpected place.



The sounds of a parade echoed throughout the demon world's royal capital, Leigeghegg. A grand, lively brigade of various races marched down the main road that led to the castle. At the head of the pack was a musical troupe of various demons playing wind and percussion instruments, and following behind them was a line of

magnificent carriages, one for each race. Seemed to me that the races were competing for prestige, their reputations on the line. Soldiers from each tribe of people surrounded their respective carriages.

First up we had the elves. Dressed in elegant apparel, their movements were so graceful that they practically glided through the street. Sparkling clusters of something or other, like stars twinkling in the night sky, floated dreamily around them, enhancing their ethereal beauty and mysterious auras. I guessed that they were using some sort of magic to create those glittering whatever.

Next were the dwarves. Their carriage, made of iron and decorated with blazing flames, was rugged and wild-looking. A monster with a tough exterior—basically what I'd describe as an armored beast—plodded its way forward, pulling it along. Meanwhile, the dwarves stamped their feet firmly on the ground as they marched. They seemed a little crude compared to the elves, but in my opinion, their attitudes and presentation just made them seem stronger and manlier.

Last up were the therianthropes. Unlike the other two groups, theirs was full of various races that were part of the species. They all marched in perfect formation, not a step out of line, and I couldn't help being impressed by the leaders who were coordinating them all. It was easy to see their allegiance to each other as well as their military prowess through their dignified, orderly procession.

Crowds of curious onlookers lined the streets, eager to watch the spectacular procession. The city's demon security forces had been mobilized for this event and were keeping an eagle eye on them and the surroundings. It was all so dazzling that I could definitely understand why the demon world's residents drove themselves into a frenzy over it.

Except it felt weirdly surreal to me, as someone who knew about the behind-the-scenes logistics of the parade's round trip. Back at the castle a while ago, I'd watched the carriages being readied by their respective people for the initial journey *into* the town; seeing them reverse course *back* to the castle as planned sort of took the luster off the whole thing for me.

"Still, I gotta admit, there's something appealing about the extravagance of this parade."

"Lord Fynar strongly prioritizes arranging populist events like this. He believes that visual spectacles are the easiest for the people to comprehend and appreciate."

That was Haloria's response to my comment. I couldn't deny that the scene before us packed a certain kind of emotional punch with all the pageantry on display. It was a sight to behold even for me, who knew all the work that went into it, so the whole thing must have

been overwhelmingly spectacular for the demon world's inhabitants considering that they knew nothing of the technicalities.

"Begging your pardon, Lord Yuki, but might it be too much to request that you focus on our defense instead of the parade?"

"Yeah, yeah. And I am. I totally am. We've got this security business locked down tight, don't we, En?"

"Yes... The parade is so amazing."

"Hell yeah it is."

"Um, perhaps you could enlighten me on the conversation you're currently having with your sword child?"

"We're talking about security, duh. I'll have you know that we take our jobs very seriously."

"Woow... That bearded man is making a dragon out of fire. He's incredible, Master."

"Whoa, you ain't kidding. Too cool."

"A-Are you really discussing security measures...?"

Me and Haloria were currently patrolling the city from the air, and I had En hefted on my shoulder in her original greatsword form. Our job was to follow the parade and communicate with the security forces on the ground if we noticed anyone or anything suspicious. And if a serious threat showed up, we'd land and fight whatever it happened to be.

Once everyone taking part in the parade had arrived safely at the demon world's royal castle, I'd be joining them for the conference, meaning my schedule today was jam-packed with all sorts of duties. The Demon King had assigned Haloria to assist me and En since we were still unfamiliar with our surroundings. She was also there in case anything unexpected occurred and we didn't know how to deal with it.

By the way, I was wearing both my mask and the special ring Fynar had given me that let me change my hair and eye colors at will. I'd also fudged my stats, so I was totally set as far as my personal security was concerned. Granted, I had no idea how effective my disguise *actually* was, but it was better than nothing.

Mwa ha ha! Dastardly Fiends of the demon world, tremble in fear at the mysterious masked man who does his best work in the shadows.

"Hey, Haloria, question. How are the dwarves not sweating balls with all the heat from those flames they're manipulating?"

"Dwarves possess much tougher skin than other humanoid races. Also, because the nature of their work relies primarily on using fire, they're quite used to high temperatures. The amount of fire they're currently using is nothing in compari— Lord Yuki, you are indeed focused on the parade! Please concentrate on your job!"

Haloria didn't think too hard about my question at first and had

started giving me a serious answer, but she abruptly realized that I was messing around more than I should've been. I couldn't help snickering at her reaction. I could joke around like this right now because there was nothing problematic going on down below. We'd contained a few rowdy folks who'd been on the verge of getting violent, but so far, there'd been no sign of the Fiends or their people.

Still can't afford to let our guard down, though. I figured the Demon King must've had some basis for his suspicion that the Fiends might attack. Otherwise, he wouldn't have insisted on security being so tight and even including me in that defensive plan. He either had information I didn't or predicted the likelihood based on his own analysis of the enemy's movements.

If we were on Earth and someone tried to stage an attack right now, when the bigwigs from each country were present, it would be a declaration of war. Any superficial alliance would quickly turn real under such a serious threat, its members banding together to confront the enemy as a united front. They would have to in order to survive.

That made me wonder, were the Fiends so powerful that they could afford to fight and possibly win a war against an alliance of various races? *How can they be so confident, though? Hmm...* Maybe because they had an army of those giant Undead bastards? I definitely wasn't a fan of that particular scenario. Who would be when faced with living—well, okay, dead—weapons of mass destruction? One was bad enough, but a whole-ass army? Nah, fam.

They moved like actual slugs, but they had outrageous offensive capabilities. Any normal soldier who took a direct hit from a giant Undead's fist would fly straight off into the afterlife. The Demon King had provided everyone in his forces, including me, with a bunch of items designed to counter artificial Undead, but they were all prototypes, so he'd said he couldn't guarantee their efficacy yet.

In any case, the long and short of it was that Fynar was a hell of a lot smarter than me. *And if he's being this damn cautious, I should follow his— Uh-oh.*

“That's...”

Just as that train of thought was running through my head, my eyes latched on to an alleyway branching off the main avenue. To any normal observer, nothing seemed out of the ordinary because they wouldn't be able to see anything in the first place. But it was a different story entirely for me and my Demon Eyes. Three individuals stood apart from the crowd of onlookers, observing the main street. They were using either an ability similar to Stealth or some sort of magic to conceal themselves from everyone.

Wait a sec. Only two of them had their attention turned toward the road; the third staggered to and fro, almost like they were

zombified. I fired up Analysis to inspect all of them and—bingo.

“Haloria, enemies sighted. Three side streets ahead of the parade’s current location. Two using magic to hide themselves and one Undead.”

“Understood. I’ll contact the guards belo— Lord Yuki?!”

Without waiting for Haloria to finish, I dove toward the ground. The two who used magic to hide themselves were classed as Nomal Daemons, which fell under the Fiends umbrella, and the third was an Undead. I suspected that this Undead in particular was in a state where it was just about to turn into one of those colossal monstrosities.

A normal giant Undead, if one could even be called that, evolved from a mana junkie who was gonna die from OD’ing. Once a mana junkie turned into one of these monstrous behemoths, they essentially became a tool that caused only mayhem. But according to the Demon King, the Fiends operated differently. Instead of using the forbidden drug on a living, humanoid individual, they used it right off the bat on an Undead. They created this version of a giant Undead monster to make it easier to control. Fynar had told me that a necromancer was necessary to command the new creature, which meant that those other two had to be just that.

There was no time to waste waiting for forces on the ground to handle them—it’d be a pain in the ass if those necromancers realized the magic corps was headed their way. Didn’t need them expediting the process of creating the gigantic Undead. *I’ll TKO them before they can transform it!*

“En, you ready?!”

“Yes...!”

I didn’t bother controlling my speed at all and just let my body free-fall. Right before I crashed into the ground, I swung En down on the Undead. One of the Fiends noticed me a split second before I landed and, with a stunned expression, tried to fend me off, but it was too late. My momentum gave my swing so much power that it split the Undead vertically from crown to crotch in a single slice. Blood sprayed everywhere as I landed in a nimble crouch, and from there, I used my bent knees to push myself off the ground and rush toward the necromancers.

I wouldn’t kill them because we needed to extract as much information as possible, but I’d start by dishing out some pain on the one who had good enough instincts to notice me. Realizing they were my target, the person moved quickly to intercept my attack. Except they were a moment too slow, which made their attempt super obvious. I deftly deflected the ball of fire they shot at me and closed the gap between us, then used my free hand to punch ’em hard in the

solar plexus.

“Guh!”

The Fiend’s body bent and spit flew from their mouth. My punch knocked the wind out of them so badly that the magic they’d been using to cloak themselves disappeared. Their hood fell back and I saw that they were a man.

Understanding that their evil little group was under attack, his companion whipped out a knife from the depths of their robe. But before they could use it on me, I kicked their legs out from underneath them, causing them to fall in a spectacular fashion.

“Ngh!”

Since I needed them alive but manageable, I decided to knock them the fugg out by smashing ’em in the face with En’s hilt. Unfortunately for both of us, though, I overestimated my power. They went whooshing away and crashed headfirst into the wall behind them, smacking a slight protrusion there.

“Ah, shit. I done did it now.”

I really had tried to hold back, but ever since my stats had gone up across the board after my fight with the bitch-ass black dragon, I’d been having trouble regulating my strength. Definitely overdid it now. *Oooooops, my bad.* Obviously, I didn’t give a damn whether this jackoff lived or died, I just couldn’t afford to kill them at present because they for sure had vital info.

I could see that the accomplice was also a man. Blood was gushing from his head and his HP was dropping concerningly fast. As the Fiend lay there, seconds from crossing over into the next world, I hurriedly pulled out a Super Potion from Inventory and doused him with it. Seeing his HP start climbing back up again, I breathed a sigh of relief. Luckily, I’d managed to save him in the nick of time. At that moment, Haloria landed on the ground next to me.

“Clearly, you have the situation under control already. I thought I understood what you were capable of, but reality certainly surpasses any theory. Well done, Lord Yuki.”

While she commented approvingly, she skillfully tied up the two Fiend men, and before I knew it, she had them wrapped up in something resembling a bamboo mat. They were ready to be taken in as suspects.

“What, that? Psh, it was nothin’. If anything, I’m impressed by how quickly and neatly you tied them up.”

“Tee hee. It’s one of the skills I practice every day. I can’t allow my abilities to dull, now can I?”

Not even a few seconds later, several members of the security force arrived in the back alley. She had most likely used some sort of magical device to communicate the location to them beforehand. A

few of them promptly dragged off the two men Haloria had tied up, their practiced movements indicating that they were used to this sort of activity. The remaining members poured what looked like some sort of holy water on the remnants of the Undead, completely incapacitating it. And then, looking completely grossed out, they started picking up its guts and other matter, stuffing them into sacks. *Probably important samples for research.* I felt kinda bad they had to do this kind of grunt work, necessary though it was.

Anyway, damn. I had no idea it'd be this hard for me to not kill someone. If I hadn't used that potion on the second dude, he would've been deader than a doornail. I seriously had to put in effort to control my current power level better, or else I might end up hurting the people in my own family, particularly the kids. The thought alone terrified me.

"All righty, time to go back to security deta— Son of a bitch, another one already? Crap, *two* more? Both are trios, with an Undead accompanied by two people again. The first set is two alleys away and the second is three. They seem to be hiding inside a building or something."

"Um, I have a question, Lord Yuki. You spotted these people visually, but am I correct in assuming that you detected our new targets without using your eyes?"

"Yeaah. You could say I'm a magician. I got a ton of tricks up my sleeves. Heh."

I spread my arms wide and gave the puzzled Haloria a big shrug. In this particular case, I'd already filled in Maps with the data for the area around us, so it would alert me right away whenever hostile presences were in the vicinity.

Okay, let's keep this momentum going and destroy the Fiends' schemes from A to Z!



Holding the signed and blood-sealed piece of parchment in his hand, Demon King Fynar looked over the others seated at the round table with an unusually serious expression. Well, unusually serious *for him*. Naturally, he was still smiling. Then, he spoke.

"With *this*, our alliance is *formed*. We may all come from *different* races, but now, we're *compatriots*. For the sake of our *friends*, for the sake of our *people*, let's take up *arms* and stand side by *side* in battle. For our *brethren*."

"For our brethren!"

When Fynar raised his cup high for the last line of his resounding declaration, the others—Elf Queen Naforazey, Dwarf King Dodah, and Leonid Beast Lord Vardroi—followed suit, lifting their own glasses up

and echoing the promise that bound them all. They all then downed their booze in a single gulp, thus entering the four races into a formal alliance.

Various representatives from each race were gathered around the table, watching the proceedings with eager gazes. At Fynar's declaration and the other leaders' acceptance, their subjects turned to each other, congratulating one another excitedly with firm handshakes. The formation of such a big, diverse alliance was a profoundly historical event for the people in attendance. Something like this had never been attempted before.

The original reason for establishing this alliance was to keep the Fiends in check, but people were optimistic about its future. They hoped for greater economic cooperation as well as closer relationships between the various countries, states, and tribes of peoples. Even in my old life, nations with strong military ties had generally been on good terms with each other. It was only natural to build connections with like-minded leaders who wanted to protect their own countries. This world and Earth were different in a lot of ways, but clearly, reasoning like this remained the same.

In light of that, it wouldn't be strange at all for this moment to end up being recorded in this world's history books. Heck, it wouldn't be overstating it to call it the moment of the century. I had to admit that, as a concerned party myself, being part of the demon species and all, I felt a small surge of emotion in my chest as I watched the sight unfold before my eyes.

"Well, now that the *hard* part is finally over, let's say good *riddance* to formality. I don't know about the *rest* of you, but *I*, for one, am *exhausted*. I think we *all* deserve pats on the back for our *efforts*. So *here's a huzzah!*"

Relieved to have some weight lifted from his shoulders too, Fynar smiled his normal enigmatic, shady grin. The uncharacteristically serious expression vanished from his face in a flash, and there wasn't a hint of tension left in his voice as he made that grand pronouncement to everyone here.

"Gah ha ha! I'll be helpin' myself ta that, lassie. Yer havin' me on, Demon King, fer in the end, ye demons dinna amount ta much. The way I see it, the rest o' us did most o' the work, eh? Were ye that afraid we'd not hold up our end o' the bargain?!"

A maid approached the table, intending to refill their cups. But as she lowered the wine bottle, the beaming Dwarf King cheerfully snatched it out of her hands and took a swig right from it. He went smoothly from his comment to her straight into roasting Fynar. The maid smiled ruefully at his actions.

During the parade, we'd discovered twelve of the Fiends' two-man

cells, capturing a total of twenty-four people. Each of them had had their own Undead specimen destined to become a giant behemoth, but we'd succeeded in eliminating them all before they could complete the forced transformation. And thanks to the Demon King's security network having been positioned strategically throughout the city in advance, we'd managed to seize all the Fiends in the area without letting a single one escape.

There *were* two cells we hadn't caught in time, but before either of their Undead could fully reach their final, massive state, we'd tied them up using a special rope the Demon King had furnished all of his people with. The rope had sealed their movements by utilizing their own expanding flesh against them, so we'd still succeeded, and all without our side suffering any casualties.

We'd settled everything so quickly that it was honestly anticlimactic. Something bugged me about the enemy's deliberate setup, though. Why would they scatter their people like that and have them remain on standby? If they'd actually wanted to destroy the parade, wouldn't the effective strategy have been to make the giant Undead appear all at once and attack from a single central location?

Then there were the cells' reactions—or lack thereof—during their captures. None of them had really resisted at all. From the minute we'd shown up and started whaling on them, they'd barely tried to escape. I hadn't felt a sense of urgency from any of them; they'd just let us catch them without putting up much of a fight.

Taking all this into account, the Fiends had exhausted their battle resources for seemingly no good reason. *So maybe they had a different goal entirely?* The ones we'd caught were currently being interrogated, but so far, every single one of them had refused to speak. It would apparently take some time until we got any kind of information out of them, which meant the situation remained unchanged.

Unlike small-time, run-of-the-mill thugs, it was clear from their organized behavior that the people we'd captured were working together with some impressive solidarity. I suspected that their behavior stemmed from their fierce loyalty to whoever their boss was, which made it that much harder to figure out why they'd allowed themselves to be captured so easily. In short, not knowing what the enemy was thinking left me feeling a bit uneasy.

"Uncouth as always, I see. We're in the midst of a conference, you bearded fool. Show some restraint for once in your life."

"Naforazey, you *know* it's impossible for a dwarf to resist the temptation of spirits, so's iffen anyone needs to temper their expectations, it would be you."

The Beast Lord tried to calm the Elf Queen, who was staring at the Dwarf King in exasperation.

“Mah good Leonid man, yer a kindred spirit and I thank ye for yer understanding! Fer us dwarves, spirits ’n’ water’re one ’n’ the same. We canna survive withoot ’em!”

The Dwarf King spoke while merrily chugging from the bottle. Then, he suddenly focused his attention on me as I leaned against a wall, taking everything in.

“Which reminds me! Demon Lord! One good turn deserves another, so let me give ye a gift as thanks fer the other day. Mah apologies fer the delay, but I wanted ta make sure I prepared somethin’ fine fer ye. Bring it oot!”

One of the dwarves in the background grunted affirmatively and headed toward me with a bundle of some sort. *‘For the other day’? Oh, he must be talking about the Super Potion I gave him at the informal meeting.*

“What is this?”

“Open it ’n’ see fer yerself, laddie.”

The bundle felt incredibly heavy. I did as he said, unwrapping it, and found...a tool for tending weapons?

“I know well and good that ye have a mighty fine weapon in yer possession, which is why I had that made for ye. We dwarves’re blacksmiths through and through, but only the best o’ us, true masters o’ our craft, can use that there piece, ye ken?”

I was holding sword-form En, so when he said “mighty fine weapon,” I got the feeling she puffed out her chest in pride, adding a haughty “hmph” for good measure. *What a cutie.*

“Wow, this is super neat, thank you. I really appreciate it. I’ll give it a go tonight.”

I gently patted En’s sword form while I replied to the Dwarf King, and her elated attitude underwent a sea of change. I sensed a mixture of embarrassment and happiness emanating from her now. *Way too cute.*

“Good. I’ll show ye how ta use it later. And let me tell ye, laddie, unlike the offerin’ o’ a certain elvish vixen, it’ll be right useful ta ye! I guarantee it.”

“Bah, subtlety isn’t your strong suit, dwarf. And not that I need to justify myself to the likes of you, but my gift was proffered with an eye to the future. I thought it prudent to focus on the long term rather than quibble over the supposed merits and utility of something temporary. Though someone as shortsighted as you certainly wouldn’t comprehend that.”

“We’re s’posed to be celebratin’, not fightin’. Methinks it wouldn’t hurt the two of ya to try harder to be nice to each other.”

Sighing, The Beast Lord scolded the bickering Dwarf King and Elf Queen. I still found it surprising that a so-called meathead like the

Beast Lord was so good at playing the peacemaker. Actually, it was rude of me to think that, because all three were the leaders of their own states. In order to earn the positions they had, they needed to be hugely capable in a bunch of ways, not just in power.

“Ah ha ha! I find it absolutely *wonderful* to see you all getting *along* so splendidly. I *must* admit, I’m *quite* looking forward to—
Hmm?”

Before he could finish, the Demon King cut himself off as one of his subordinates rushed toward him and whispered something in his ear. Though Fynar himself seemed composed, his subordinate was anything but, unable to hide how crazy uneasy he was. Once the report was over, the Demon King quietly gave his subordinate a command—one for their ears only. Then, he turned toward the rest of us and spoke.

“Everyone. It *seems* we have some uninvited *guests* in the form of those *pesky* artificial Undead.”



I put my mask on again, changed my hair and eye colors once more using the ring the Demon King had given me, and raced toward the castle gate. There, I found an intense battle raging. The sounds of weapons clanging and beastly roars dominated the space as the Demon King’s soldiers waged a fight against giant Undead monsters just like the ones I myself had faced on more than one occasion.

“Damn, that’s a lot, though...”

Thus far, I’d fought all my Undead behemoth opponents one at a time. But I wouldn’t be granted that luxury this time because there were more than twenty of the freaks here. One Undead titan alone had stupidly high strength and stamina, so to be swamped by an actual horde made the situation critical.

As far as I could see, though, our front line wasn’t crumbling, which just went to show how tough the demon soldiers holding down the fort were. They were equipped with heavy, full-body armor, and, shields raised, they braced themselves against the Undead battalion’s direct onslaught. While they played defense, the soldiers clad in ordinary light armor waited for the right chance to hurl some sort of liquid on the Undead. After that, the magic corps would follow up with magical attacks.

Each individual and group clearly had their respective tasks down pat because they all worked together like a well-oiled machine. I actually felt really safe as I watched them. Had to give the Demon King props on his people’s incredible competence.

As for the liquid the light-armored soldiers were tossing, it had to be Mana Dispersant, the special product the Demon King had

developed for use specifically against these giant Undead. The chemical apparently had the power to repel the surrounding mana.

The Regeneration ability normally worked by consuming the reserves of magical energy within a host. Because this particular breed of Undead was created via the forbidden Mana Absorption Drug that forced the specimen to absorb mana beyond the body's limits, however, they actually used ambient mana to regenerate and transform their bodies. As a result, the Mana Dispersant worked because it had the complete opposite effect as the Mana Absorption Drug, effectively blocking an Undead colossus's inherent functioning mechanism. More specifically, it stopped a normal Undead from mutating into a giant Undead as long as the process was underway. And if an Undead *did* manage to complete its transformation, the chemical tanked its Regeneration ability. Basically, it prevented the giant Undead from adapting to their opponent as the battle progressed like the one I'd fought last time had.

There was one major issue with the Mana Dispersant, though. Because it was still a prototype, the full extent of its effectiveness was still unknown, so it hadn't been produced in large quantities. The longer I watched the battle unfold, the stronger my conviction that Nell's holy magic was better at blocking the Regeneration ability got—though the Mana Dispersant *did* seem pretty useful. Even if it could only curb an Undead's Regeneration for a short time, that was still better than nothing and would work majorly to our advantage.

Also, demons as a species possessed much more powerful physical abilities than humans, and all the soldiers who were fighting right now were just that. Their teamwork was solid as they dealt with the unfortunate problem at hand. A giant Undead would always pose a serious threat, especially with their current numbers, but when taking all these factors into account, the situation was far from hopeless.

"All right, En, time for us to make our debut. You ready to put in work?"

"Yes, I am... Leave it to me."

I could sense that she was raring to go as I pulled her out of her scabbard. Next, I spoke to Haloria, who'd been assigned to accompany us for the entire day.

"Haloria, we're gonna do our thing. You cool with that?"

"My lord has instructed me to give you free rein. I can't say for certain how helpful I'll be, but I'll do my best to support your endeavors."

"Okay, I'm counting on you! Time to send these annoying sacks of Undead shit packing!"

On the last word, I bolted toward the nearest giant and, as usual, used my momentum to slash it clean in two. Since this would be my

third encounter with these godforsaken super zombies, I was pretty used to handling them. Knowing how dull their movements were aside from their attacks, I could easily hit them with big, power-focused attacks.

I knew it'd get harder for En's blade to slice through them the longer they remained "alive" to adapt, but based on what I remembered of my last fight with one of these things, it took some time for them to build up a resistance to slashes. All I had to do was chop 'em up into as many small pieces as possible before their Regeneration abilities could get to work. No big deal.

The demon forces in the midst of their confrontation against the horde of massive Undead looked surprised by my sudden appearance, but they rallied quickly enough, seeing a prime opportunity to press their advantage now that I was here too. Except they didn't launch an attack. Instead, the Demon King's soldiers proceeded to wrap both pieces of the Undead colossus I'd cut in half in a huge swath of fabric that seemed to be some sort of magical device. Once the parts were completely swallowed up by the cloth, the soldiers tied them up with special rope. *What in the—* I didn't even get to finish my confused thought before the result revealed itself: the Undead assholes weren't regenerating.

I could see the two halves squirming and wriggling like usual, but it looked like the fabric was drastically hindering their Regeneration ability. The divided Undead monstrosity was effectively incapacitated. It was fascinating. Depending on the method used, then, it wasn't necessary to slice and dice them to neutralize them.

Based on what I'd just learned, the best strategy would be for me to slice an Undead into two and leave the Demon King's forces to manage the aftermath. I went full speed ahead now that I had a plan of attack. Slash two. Then three. I kept hacking away at them like an overpowered machine, letting my brute strength push me from one enemy to the next.

One after another, the Undead titans fell under my aggressive charge. All of their attempts to guard themselves and retaliate with their giant fists ended in vain because I rushed them lightning-fast from above. *I'm unstoppable, bitches.* It was the ultimate meathead bulldozing strategy that shamelessly and ruthlessly relied on absolutely nothing but my physical ability.

"Bwa ha ha ha! The only thing you fuckers have going for you is strength, but you're still no match for me!"

"Wh-Who the hell is he? And how can he laugh in a situation like this?"

"I-I think he might be the ally employed by the King. But in this case, it's difficult to decide who exactly the monster is, huh?"

Shut up, fools. Less spectating and more fighting!

Pretty much the center of the demon forces' attention, I kept on cutting up the giant Undead. In the next instant, I heard a familiar, deep voice booming from behind me.

"Well, now! This sure ain't a triflin' lot, eh?! All the more reason fer us dwarves ta run riot 'n' show these buggers what's what!"

"Aye!"

Dwarf King Dodah, an enormous hammer resting on his shoulder, and his forces joined the fray. I couldn't resist calling out to him while I swung En around.

"Hey! Are you sure you should be here?! Wouldn't it be smarter for you to stay out of this?!"

"I know that voice. That ye, Demon Lord?! I didn' recognize ye with that ridiculous mask!"

"No disrespect, Dwarf King, but I'm trying to disguise myself, y'know? So could you maybe *not* tell the whole world who I really am?"

"Och, that makes sense, it does! Apologies, laddie!"

He roared with laughter, clearly taken by the thrill of battle. *Well, I guess it's my fault for expecting this old fart to pick up on the subtleties of a situation. Naforazey sure was right.* With that slightly rude thought running through my head, I continued talking to him.

"Whatever. The horse has left the barn, so it is what it is. Anyway, why the hell are you out here fighting like it's just a regular-ass day for you?!"

"Dinna fash yerself on that front, laddie! After all, the alliance exists precisely fer times like these, eh?!"

"I— Well, I dunno, man. I just figured the normal reaction for most folks would be to cut and run."

"Yer too naive, Demon Lord. Bein' made king shows that a man has power. No subject'll follow a king who canna prove 'is mettle in moments like this. So here I am!"

Huh. I found it enlightening to learn that his sense of values pretty much matched mine. I felt the same way he did about conducting oneself since I was technically a "lord" too. Plus, the Dwarf King's level and stats were leagues above those of his fellow dwarves', so no doubt he was one hell of a reliable ally to have in battle.

"N' besides, I ain't alone!"

That made me curious, so as the Dwarf King turned around, I did too.

"Heh, seems we aren't wanting for enemies today. I much prefer it like this on account of I was burning for some exercise. Sitting 'round does a body no good. I'll have to thank these Undead fellas real nice, yeah?"

“Good grief, why is it my lot in life to be surrounded by hot-blooded fools? We might as well get on with it, but let’s make it quick. We still have much to discuss, and we certainly can’t do so if we’re distracted by this.”

The Beast Lord and Elf Queen appeared dramatically just like the Dwarf King, trailed by their own people. And here I’d thought demons were the only meatheads around here. Clearly, I’d been wrong. Turned out demi-humans and therianthropes were more or less birds of the same muscle-brained feather.

I understood the mentality, though, considering how much harsher life was in this world than on Earth. First and foremost, strength was a vital component of survival, so the fact that a leader could and would participate in a scenario like this made them worthy of their people’s trust and affection. It’d be a tremendous loss for the people if said leader suffered a serious wound and died, though, which meant they really were just meatheads if they didn’t care or even think that far ahead.

Kind of fed up with my thoughts running in circles, I asked them something that had come to mind when they’d shown up.

“If the three of you are here, what’s the Demon King doing?”

“That you, Demon Lord? To answer your question, Fynar won’t be coming.”

“Indeed. ‘I respectfully *decline* to venture out there, as my *expertise* relies on using my *brain*. So *please*, do your best for *me* as well!’ He said something to that effect while smiling that unnervingly suspicious smile of his.”

Yeah, okay, that’s definitely on brand for him. I wasn’t particularly surprised to find out he was doing his own thing while the rest of us were out here duking it out with the Undead. Homeboy really marched to the beat of his own drum, like, damn. Even though I’d only known him for a few days, the fact that I could so easily imagine all that about him made me laugh out loud unconsciously.

In the meantime, the Elf Queen surveyed the area with a perplexed expression.

“I didn’t expect there to be so many. And I find it impossible to believe that Fynar’s security network was so easily broken through. Where did these behemoths come from?”

“You know, you make a really good point. Haloria, got any leads?”

Waiting nearby, my assistant, Haloria, nodded in response.

“Without our knowledge, a tunnel was bored between the first and second ramparts, allowing the enemy direct access to the castle grounds from underground. Since the defensive forces were primarily stationed around the exterior of the first rampart, there was enough of

a delay in their response to the threat that resulted in the second rampart being breached.”

The demon world’s castle was enclosed by a double layer of ramparts, also known as defensive walls. Our current location, where the army of giant Undead was staging its assault, was inside the perimeter of the second wall. Since the first wall was the exterior rampart and the second the interior, that meant the castle itself was just behind the second wall.

A tunnel, huh? The enemy had most likely been digging it stealthily specifically for today’s attack. It was entirely possible that they’d used the giant Undead themselves for the task instead of heavy machinery.

Because my job included security this time around, I’d had Maps open this whole time so that I could notice enemies immediately. The problem was that I hadn’t been able to detect this attack at all, and now I knew why. As a refresher, I needed to actually *see* a place at least once for Maps to fill it in. Otherwise, it would never be able to warn me about any hostile presences nearby. Long story short, Maps was basically useless anywhere underground.

Aware of this weakness, I always ran the Scout ability concurrently, and this time was no different. Unfortunately, despite it being active, it hadn’t reacted either because the tunnel had been outside of its range.

This may not be the end of the giant Undead army, then. There was the possibility of a second or even third horde marching through the tunnel. Not that that would be a problem. We had a lot more breathing room to fight now that we had more reinforcements. I’d take it as the perfect opportunity for me to learn how each race fought.



“Right, then. I’d *like* your report.”

At the Demon King’s request, one of his kneeling subordinates responded.

“Yes, my lord. As we speak, the battle currently rages within the second defensive wall. Though the Undead initially broke through unexpectedly, the anti-artificial Undead unit managed to hold the line and prevent the enemy from infiltrating further into the castle grounds. Moreover, thanks to Demon Lord Yuki’s efforts, the situation is shifting in our advantage.”

“Just as I *expected* of him. Without his *much*-needed presence, I’m afraid this *attack* would have put us in *quite* the bind.”

“I agree. We most certainly would have seen a drastic increase in damage to our people and city were it not for him. Still, though the

anti-artificial Undead unit is composed of talented individuals, there's no denying that the Undead's tremendous physical strength and Regeneration ability, combined with their large numbers on this occasion, pose a serious threat to us all. It's likely that our allies of other races have suffered harm as well."

"Hmm, yes, I *concur*. Especially since those three *gleefully* charged into the fray once they realized *war* was upon us. Considering that they're the *leaders* of their respective peoples, I do so *wish* they would behave a bit more *maturely*..."

Fynar wore a strained smile as he thought back to the way the chiefs of the dwarves, elves, and therianthropes had reacted to the knowledge of the Undead invasion. In the next instant, though, another of his subordinates rushed toward him, jolting him out of his slightly wayward thoughts.

"My lord, I come bearing more news! The enemy sent in a detached force, and it is currently fighting with our defensive force within the castle grounds!"

One of Fynar's eyebrows twitched up when he heard this new information.

"*Fascinating* indeed... I *wonder* if their goal is to *free* the Fiends we *captured* during the parade. And once they *do*, they can implement a *pincer* operation, assaulting us from *within* and *without*."

"I do believe you're correct, my lord. They either investigated the castle grounds ahead of time through subterfuge or have individuals possessing search-related skills, as they're taking a direct path to the prisons where the Fiends are being held. Under your advance directive, we increased the number of guards stationed outside and en route to these prisons, so we detected the intruders early and dealt with them accordingly before they could release their comrades."

"Good. *Very* good. I'm glad I hedged our *bets* and gave that instruction after seeing how *insufferably* one-note the enemy's *movements* were during the parade. I was *right* to be suspicious, then."

The Demon King quietly ruminated for some time before speaking again.

"Okay. *Yuki* and our new *friends* will manage outside, so we'll give *our* undivided attention to *eliminating* any obstacles inside. Direct as *many* guards still within the castle as you can to *focus* on the prisons. But I *don't* want you to neglect *other* points of defense either, which *means* you'll need to be *careful* with the personnel distribution. Because I highly *doubt* that this is the *entirety* of the enemy's forces."

"Yes, my lord!" everyone in attendance replied in unison.

"So that you're all *aware*, if they're *marshaling* an attack on such a *large* scale, the probability is *high* that a few of their *top brass* are either *nearby* or even *in* combat. Though we've taken various

preventive measures, we can't *afford* to let our guard down. All right, everyone, this marks a *critical* juncture in the situation. Let's *teach* the Fiends that things *won't* go according to their plans."

Having received their king's command, Fynar's subordinates affirmed their duty with renewed vigor in their voices. Then, they all sprang into action, going about their respective tasks.



Who is that monster? In his carefully chosen hiding place, a man had been monitoring the situation as it developed. But once the masked individual carrying an unusually long sword had appeared and proceeded to run riot, he'd found himself trembling in fear, his body stiff with it. He fully understood just how powerful this one of the Demon King's men was, though he was loath to admit such an aggravating truth.

Today's campaign had been thoroughly devised. Using the test subjects created by his fellow engineers, the goal had been to eliminate the various leaders of the interracial alliance ranked directly under Fynar. He and his comrades had even accounted for the possibility of the Demon King and his allies thwarting their experimental army without incurring any significant harm: in the event their primary goal was not achieved, they would shift to a harassment strategy using the test subjects.

He and the leadership had most definitely *not* underestimated the enemy's capabilities. Consequently, approximately ten minutes after commencing their raid, they had succeeded in infiltrating the inner rampart of the demon world's castle. There, they had encountered dogged resistance from the enemy that resulted in a standstill, which they'd anticipated. That was when the real battle had begun.

Or so he had thought. The masked entity joining the fight had been a completely unexpected development.

The mysterious man, who was most likely a demon of some sort, easily wielded a blade longer than he was tall, splitting test subjects in half with a single, powerful stroke of his sword. His strength was truly unbelievable.

Based on what the man saw, even if a test subject attempted to defend itself, the disguised individual would change direction and forcibly attack them from above. But as far as he was aware, only their faction's leader and a handful of people in the upper echelons of their organization possessed power to such a degree.

I wasn't informed the enemy had someone like him. Cold sweat dripped down his body. Involuntarily, he felt resentment building toward their ally's covert intelligence unit, which was responsible for collecting information on their enemy, for its oversight.

Wait, I just remembered something. He recalled the report on the most recent field experiment and the lack of observation data from it. The experiment had been cut extremely short when the test subject had been eliminated rather rapidly. If his memory served, his subordinates who'd been sent to monitor the situation had become untraceable not long after. He had concluded they'd been apprehended by the Demon King's people, leaving him with no understanding of the situation. Until now.

Watching the masked person rampage through the army of test subjects now, the man decided it was extremely likely that he had been responsible for the incident. The Fiends' current plan might have been able to be altered if only their surveyors had returned safely, but it was too little, too late.

Regarding the plan itself, it involved attacking on two fronts. While the enemy was busy dealing with the violent test subjects, he and his people would release their comrades who had deliberately gotten themselves captured during the parade. Once free, they would mount their own assault from within the demon world's castle, complementing the raid outside by the test subjects.

In order to accomplish this, a detached force had been mobilized. The troops outside the castle were tasked with dramatically upping the ante in order to thin the Demon King's security forces on the inside and ensure the detached force's success in freeing their captured fellows. Unfortunately for them, the masked man and his allies were making quick work of incapacitating the test subjects one after another, giving the Demon King's side a great deal of leeway to respond competently to the situation. That meant the Fiend and his comrades had not done enough to grab their enemy's attention.

Given how quickly their opponents had responded, they hadn't spent nearly long enough stalling for time. At this rate, they would needlessly expend their own resources and the battle would be over before they achieved even a single one of their goals. But on second thought, he no longer cared about their tactical objectives. The masked individual was much too dangerous. Letting that mysterious man go would most certainly prove to be a serious hindrance to their leader. He would have to exterminate the person right here, right now, and by any means necessary.

Resolve hardened, the man concentrated solely on the masked individual, ignoring everyone else around him. He watched his opponent unblinkingly, taking in every move he made, ensuring he knew everything about him to guarantee a kill. He searched for an opening...and found one in the long, sweeping strokes the masked man made with his sword. Most likely owing to the test subjects' sluggish movements, he relied more on power than technique, which

created multiple points of opportunity the Fiend could use to his advantage.

The man would aim for the moment when his opponent shook off his sword and paused to search for his next prey. His original mission had been to take overall command of the operation and manipulate the test subjects from the shadows, keeping himself hidden the entire time. Moving to attack necessitated exposing his location, yet he remained unbothered. Even were he to be killed during this battle, as long as he managed to eliminate the masked man, that in itself would be a tremendous boon to their cause.

“Haah...”

He exhaled deeply and focused his mind on the task at hand. The commotion around him faded into the background. Slowly, almost leisurely, he drew a throwing knife from within his robe while steadily sharpening his senses.

“Bwuh?!”

Where is he?! The moment he’d determined the optimal trajectory for his knife, the masked man had disappeared. Having lost sight of the man possessing such an intense aura, the Fiend hurriedly surveyed the area.

“Hey, sooo, whatcha lookin’ around like that for?”

Upon hearing the voice, the man immediately tried to escape, but he was just too late. He sensed a heavy attack rushing toward him from behind. By the time he actually became aware of the impact, it had already slammed him to the ground.

“Too bad for you I ain’t gonna be done in by a surprise attack that easily. You’re a necromancer, right? Which means you must be the one controlling those giant mofos.”

Realizing he had been roundly stomped down, the man rolled away and scrambled to his feet. He took up a fighting stance and aggressively swung the knife still clutched in his hand, intending to counterattack, but he was too slow in this instance as well. The masked man grabbed him by the face and smashed him into the wall of the inner rampart behind him. Then, his opponent used the hilt of his sword to bash savagely at his knife-holding arm.

Crack. As soon as he heard that ominous sound coming from his own body, acute pain lanced through him. Cold sweat seeped from every one of his pores.

“Don’t even *think* about trying anything funny. I have orders to take in any necromancers I find, but the Demon King also told me I can kill ’em if they give me more trouble than they’re worth. Yo, Haloria! C’mere, wouldja?!”

I’m no match for him. The man acknowledged that he had made the wrong choice. He now knew that he should have withdrawn and

returned to headquarters with intel the second he'd recognized that the masked man was a real threat. Perhaps he would have acted more rationally had he not lost his composure in the heat of the moment; he had been appointed the commanding officer of this operation for a reason, after all. Despite that, however, he hadn't been able to ignore the masked man's presence. The instant panic had taken over and he'd decided to attack should have been the instant he'd realized he was no longer thinking normally. *What a catastrophic blunder.*

Even so, he couldn't allow himself to be captured. He still had one more move he could make. Regardless of his rank as commanding officer, at this point, he was reasonably confident that his comrades would successfully carry out the operation were he to be removed from the battlefield. In fact, having the enemy's attention focused on him might even serve to buy his people more time.

"If you find yourself facing death, better to survive in disgrace and sharpen your fangs for the next opportunity to rip out your enemy's throat."

The leader for whom he held immeasurable respect and affection always said these words to him and his comrades.

For the sake of our ambition.

Then, the man screamed.

"To me, now!"

The masked man instantly leaped back without even turning to check behind him, probably because he possessed some skill that warned him of impending danger. He used the momentum of his jump, which he had put his full might into, to evade. The Fiend silently applauded his opponent's judgment. It had been the right call in this instance, as the test subjects surrounding them immediately turned toward him at his command and started to charge. Now freed from the masked individual's grasp, the man raced up the wall of the inner rampart, intent on making his escape.

"You fucker!"

The masked man attempted to give chase, but the Fiend had the test subjects impede him. As powerful as his opponent was, even he couldn't ignore violence in such great numbers. *I hope this works.* Either way, he had to remain vigilant and keep his guard up. The man had only gotten a glimpse of the masked individual's true power. The sliver he had seen, however, indicated to him it was possible that he might be able to escape the test subjects' attacks and resume his pursuit in ten seconds or less.

It took the man less than that long to flee into a back alley of the city outside the castle. Yet he had not a moment to feel relief while he headed down the escape route he had installed in advance, for he was running with the express purpose of putting as much distance as

possible between him and the castle. As he ran—he took a powerful blow to the abdomen!

“Gah?!”

A dull pain raced through him at the unexpected assault. His breath lodged in his chest and he found himself unable to move. The unknown assailant, who had appeared without warning, seized the opportunity to knock him to the ground. He didn’t even have a moment to resist before he was bound in shackles.

“Ngh...”

He moaned in agony as the arm that had been broken by the masked man was forcibly contorted.

“Apologies for the inconvenience. Lord Fynar was absolutely certain a few like you would keep yourselves hidden, so he instructed me to stay alert instead of participating in the battle. He wanted me to wait on standby until one of you revealed yourself.”

The man was familiar with the individual who accosted him. She was one of the attendants to Demon King Fynar whom they had designated as highly dangerous.

“Y-You’re...a Silent!”

“The moment you failed to maintain your composure at his rampage was the moment you lost, you know. Oh, by the way, I received a report that a majority of your companions who invaded the castle have been captured, so there’s no need for you to fret about that.”

“Wha—”

They saw through every facet of our scheme?!

“I believe it’s time for you to sleep now.”

“No... Dammit...”

The man’s vision darkened as he was forced to sniff some sort of drug. Moments later, he fell unconscious.



Evening. The great hall of the demon world’s castle, where a banquet was being held. Everyone involved in The Four Races Alliance Summit was gathered here, chatting and mingling and just generally being friendly. I figured an event like this would’ve been postponed on account of the attack on the castle, but I was wrong. It went ahead as scheduled—a display of the alliance’s unwavering strength even in the face of a strike by the enemy. Basically, it was our way of telling our foes they’d have to try a whole lot harder if they wanted to shake us.

“In the *end*, I was on the *mark* about their strategy. They *deliberately* allowed themselves to be *captured* during the parade so that they could gain *access* to the castle from *within*. From *there*, they

planned to *distract* us using the *mayhem* caused by their artificial *Undead* while their *detached* force proceeded to *free* their imprisoned comrades. After *that*, they would have attacked us on *two* fronts, one *inside* and one *out*. In *short*, a *pincer* operation. Since I *suspected* that they would be up to their *tricks*, I saw no *reason* to venture outside, and instead *focused* on commanding *our* forces from inside.”

I gave the Demon King the stink eye as he spoke *ever* so nonchalantly about what’d gone down.

“Ya don’t say. But FYI, the other three went balls to the wall out there with me. Thought you’d wanna know.”

“Well, *be* that as it may, I *personally* find their behavior *odd*, to put it *politely*. After all, if a group’s *leader* winds up dead, what *good* is that to anyone? The answer is *none*. And besides, I think it’s *unacceptable* for a *supreme* commander to *participate* in the front lines. So in *this* particular instance, I *fully* support the humans’ way of doing battle.”

Hate to say it, but I’m with you on this one, pal.

“Oh, hey, what about the tunnel they dug?”

The one the giant bastards had used to infiltrate the castle. At a glance, it seemed so long that you couldn’t figure out where the other end was. But once the fight with the Undead titans had ended, Fynar had sent out a recon squad to investigate it. I was definitely looking forward to hearing what they found.

“My people *did*, in fact, follow the tunnel *back* to its *source*. Unfortunately for *us*, the *base* they found was a *husk* of its former self, *abandoned* quite some time ago.”

“So it was a dead end both literally and figuratively, huh?”

“You *could* say that, I suppose. It doesn’t *matter*, however, because we can *count* one of the Fiends’ *leaders* among those we *captured* this time around. *Thanks* to him—the *unruly* child you discovered who was *manipulating* the artificial Undead—we were able to *acquire* a few pieces of *vital* information.”

“Ahhh... Him, eh?”

The dude who was *super* good at running away. Since the situation had been different from the one with the Fiend who’d escaped during my time at the humans’ royal capital, I’d just about busted out my wings in hot pursuit. Before I could, though, one of Fynar’s people had cornered and subdued this one before he’d managed to get too far.

Speaking of the Demon King, I knew he’d set up a security network throughout the city in advance because he’d been a hundred percent sure that people were keeping themselves hidden while they controlled the giant Undead. But still, I once again found myself amazed at how quickly he’d taken action after receiving the initial report of the attack. Not only had his predictions so far been spot-on, but he’d also strategically dispatched his people to capture those very

bad guys.

“*Ergo*, I’m now *formulating* a strategy based on the *new* information we’ve obtained. I *plan* on making my *move* soon. When the *time* comes, Yuki, won’t you *help* me destroy the Fiends’ *base* and the *channels* they’re using to transport their *resources*?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll do whatever you want, man. You really are a slave driver, you know that? Jeez.”

“Heh heh heh. You should know *very* well by now that I’ll do *whatever* it takes to raise our *chance* of success, even if only by a *bit*.”

While I chatted with Fynar, the Dwarf King strolled over to us, holding a wine bottle in one hand. Judging by how red his face was, I was betting good DP that he was drunker than a skunk.

“Fynar! Yer just a bag o’ skin ’n’ bones, ye are! No surprise ta me, then, that the demon world’s in an uproar ’cause yer too bloody skinny! I suggest ye take this opportunity ta train yerself, laddie!”

“Oh, *hmm*, well... Y-You *see*, using my *brain* is my forte, so I’ve never thought it *necessary* to build muscles.”

“Yer spoutin’ utter tripe, ye are! The most important thing fer a man is muscles! ’N’ the second most important thing’s also muscles! Feast yer eyes ’pon me own muscles, honed from years of smithin’, ye ken! If yer ever o’ a mind ta do summat ’bout that spindly body, ye just come ta me and we dwarves’ll whip ye into shape like us!”

“I *understand*, Dodah. Trust me, I *do*, and I *appreciate* your offer, so there’s no *need* for you to *strip*...”

I couldn’t stop laughing as I watched them because Fynar looked completely lost about how to handle a drunk. A moment later, I felt a tug on my sleeve.

“Master... This is very delicious. I want you to eat it. Say ‘aah.’”

“Hm? Oh, sure. Mmm, you’re right, this *is* good. It tastes even better because you fed it to me, En. Thanks, kiddo.”



“Really...? Then, have this too. Say ‘aah.’”

“Wh-Whoa, lucky me. Thanks again. Mm-hmm, that’s tasty. It really is, but why don’t you tell me what’s going on here, En? You know you don’t have to go to the trouble of feeding me. I’m more than happy if you just eat your own portion.”

I questioned her while chewing on the piece of meat she’d fed me, puzzled by her behavior. Leila, who was in charge of my sword girl, answered instead, beaming her usual smile.

“Tee hee hee. After trying a variety of delicious foods, it seems she wanted you to savor them as well, Lord Yuki. Isn’t that right, En?”

“Yes... Tasty food is even tastier when I eat it with everyone. Leila, you too. Say ‘aah.’”

“Oh my, thank you so much.”

Yup, she’s an angel, and that’s putting it lightly. I grinned, comforted by the delightful scene I was blessed to witness. Intrigued by the sight, the Beast Lord, who’d just been silently drinking his booze up until now, spoke to me.

“Well, now. Ain’t this something. Demon Lord, is that little girl yers?”

“Bull’s-eye. She’s my kid.”

“I see, I see. I got a daughter, meself. Right around her age too. Children are precious, ain’t they? They light up a place just by bein’ in it. Girlie, what’s yer name?”

The Beast Lord was apparently in a really good mood. Cheeks puffed as she happily stuffed her face with meat, En paused for a moment and answered him.

“Zaien...”

“Zai-en, eh? A fine, strong name, that is. So, I see ya like meat.”

“Yes, I love it... I’m happy when I eat it.”

“Oh ho! Ye got real promise, wee lassie! I do agree that meat is good. It’ll become yer own flesh and blood, make ye strong. Do ye ken the secret ta growin’ up strong? Eat lots, play lots, ’n’ sleep lots!”

The Dwarf King had apparently decided to stop pestering the Demon King and wandered over to us. Naturally, he kept drinking.

“Dodah’s got the right of it. Eat well and grow big.”

“Yes... I’ll eat a lot and get muscly like both of you, Uncle Furry and Uncle Beardy.”

En held up both arms and squeezed her fists, flexing her tiny biceps with all her might. The Beast Lord and Dwarf King burst out laughing, howling hysterically.

“Gah ha ha! Muscly like us, ye ken?! I’m lookin’ forward ta it, lassie!”

“Heh heh. Demon Lord, this child’ll certainly be someone to

contend with in the future!”

“I never doubted it. My kid’s the strongest you’ll meet.”

They both seemed delighted with En as they vigorously rubbed her head. The fact that the two of them recognized her power told me they had a good eye for stuff like this.

But let me make one thing clear, Little Miss En. It’d make your master really happy if you didn’t get all jacked and brawny.

“I hate to interrupt the pleasantries, Uncle Furry and Uncle Beardy, but it might behoove you dolts to stop smiling like imbeciles. Though I can appreciate how adorable the little maiden is, I’d like to remind you this is still a diplomatic event. Please conduct yourselves accordingly.”

The Elf Queen looked exasperated as she lectured them.

“As for you, little maiden.”

“Yesh...?”

“It’s all well and good to grow by eating, but you *are* a lady first and foremost. You mustn’t aim for these buffoons’ muscly builds. No, child, you should instead apply yourself toward achieving a perfect physique like mine!”

So saying, the Elf Queen traced her fingers over her body, putting on a ridiculously flirty air as she posed seductively. *Looks like the queen’s joining in on the fun too.*

“Woow... You have a nice figure. Very glamorous.”

“Yes, child, give voice to the truth! To be able to comprehend my beauty shows that you have quite the discerning eye, little maiden!”

“Ye tell us ta conduct ourselves accordin’ly and yet here ye are gettin’ carried away. Glass houses ’n’ all that, eh?”

This time, the Dwarf King was the one who commented with a fed up expression. But the Elf Queen ignored him and continued to treat us to a variety of poses. *Oh, yeah, she’s way into this. She looks half-drunk, so that’s probably why.*

A few elves in the vicinity made sure to interject with compliments every time she changed poses.

“I expected no less of you, Lady Naforazey!”

“Your loveliness knows no bounds, Lady Naforazey!”

“You’re as divine as a goddess, Lady Naforazey!”

And so on. Clearly, she had them well trained. *Too well trained, actually, since they were kinda going overboard.*

“Hmm... Then I’ll grow up to have a nice, muscly figure!”

“Not ta rain on yer parade, lassie, but methinks ‘nice’ and ‘muscly’ dinna quite go together, ye ken?”

“Don’t worry... I’ll work really, really hard.”

“Oh ho, ye dinna say? In that case, mayhap things’ll work out like ye want.”

“Heh heh. Demon Lord, yer daughter’s an entertaining little cub.”

“Lord Yuki, your child is already a comely maiden, and I’m certain she’ll shine even more as she matures, so you had best take care to raise her properly. You must make sure she doesn’t wander down a strange path in life.”

I fell through the looking glass but wound up in En’s Wonderland instead. As En had the adults dancing in the palm of her tiny hand—metaphorically speaking, of course—everyone who was watching laughed in delight.

Side Story 1: Heroes and Demon Lords

On a certain day in the dungeon.

“Gwa ha ha! Do you Demon Lord Magical Girls really think you can win against the charismatically evil Hero, Yuki?!”

“Yes, we do! If we combine our powers, we can defeat anyone!”

Demon Lord Magical Girl Iluna posed enthusiastically as she said that, with her fellow Demon Lord Magical Girls lining up next to her. In order, there was Shii, En, and the triplets, Rei, Rui, and Roh.

“Then prove yourselves! Lefisios, my servant! I command you to show them our might!”

“Mwa ha ha ha ha! You will not...defeat us, you, um, children!”

Lefi’s delivery was stilted because she clearly wasn’t yet familiar with her lines, but she said it all anyway, doing her best to play a villain. She then whipped out her wings and flew dramatically into the air.

“Nooo! Using your wings isn’t fair, Lady Lefifi!”

“Not fair, you say? What nonsense. Victory by any means necessary is our motto! You Demon Lord Magical Girls are much too softhearted if you believe otherwise!”

“Well said! You tell ’em, Lefi, my ever-faithful servant! Plunge the world into chaos and fear! Now, what are you Demon Lord Magical Girls gonna do about her, huh? *Can* you do anything about her?”

“Hmm... To confirm, I *am* playing the part of a hero’s follower, yes?”

“Yeah, an evil hero’s servant. Don’t worry about the details, though.”

“I know Lady Le—no, wait! I know Servant Lefi’s weakness already! RuiRui, do it!”

At Demon Lord Magical Girl Iluna’s request, the second-oldest wraith triplet, Rui, gave a strong nod. With her usual firm expression, she used her illusion magic and, *bang*, conjured an illusion.

“Ngh! Th-That phantom treat! It is castella!”

Indeed, Rui had made a castella cake appear. And for whatever reason, Lefi acknowledged that it wasn’t actually real. The illusory dessert bounced cheerfully in the air in front of Lefi’s eyes, tempting her. But despite knowing that it was fake, my bride still reached her hand out toward it. She was spellbound by it, unable to resist.

“ReiRei, RohRoh, your turn!”

“Grr! Wh-What a terrible blunder I have made!”

When Lefi inevitably dropped her guard, Rei used her telekinesis to bind her body, followed by Roh using her mind magic to mess with Lefi’s ability to control her movements. The end result was Lefi jerking around in the air in all directions before spiraling downward and crash-landing onto the carpet in the real throne room with a *whoosh*. Naturally, in her normal state, the Supreme Dragon could’ve neutralized their magic as easily as she breathed. Except she hadn’t been thinking clearly, and per our house rules, she’d lost as soon as she’d given in to temptation.

“Now’s our chance! Everyone, commence the tickle attack!”

“Gah! Wai— Wah ha ha ha ha! Y-You heathens! Ha ha! C-Cease! Tee hee hee! Stop at once!”

With Lefi lying defenseless on the floor, the little-girl gang swarmed her in a heartbeat and began tickling her all over. By the way, the wraith sisters were currently possessing their dolls, so they had physical forms right now too, which meant they could participate. They and the others energetically tickled the hell out of my wife.

Once they’d gotten their fill of torturing Lefi, the little girls moved off of her one by one. She remained there gasping for air, her beautiful silver hair a mess and the hem of her dress all over the place. Frankly, I found it a bit hard to look directly at her in her bewitchingly disheveled state.

“Y-You... Ahem! Did you truly believe I’d let you trounce my loyal servant so easily?! Prepare yourselves, Demon Lord Magical Girls!”

“Master, what ‘trounce’?”

“It means ‘to defeat,’ Shii. Back to the show... Then I’ll grant your wish and deal with you myself! Unlike that there ding-dong, I’m incredibly powerful!”

“Y-Yuki, you will r-regret referring to me a-as such.”

Miss Ding-Dong struggled to speak as she panted, still trying to catch her breath. But her dark murmur fell on deaf ears. I had no use for someone who’d gotten her ass handed to her because she’d let her greed win.

“ReiRei, RuiRui, RohRoh!”

“Ha, you silly little thing! Like those cheap tricks will work on the strongest hero alive!”

The wraith triplets turned my way and each one directed her specialty magical attack at me, but I nimbly dodged all of them. My Demon Eyes clearly saw all the magic whirling around me, so it was easy to predict their moves.

“Mmm, mmm, mmm! What a tough enemy! Everyone, now’s the time to combine our powers! Shii! EnEn! Do it!”

When Demon Lord Magical Girl Iluna commanded her other two allies, they both nodded in agreement, seeming to have figured out what she wanted done.

“Huh?! Whoa, hey! That’s dangerous!”

“What she wanted done” was apparently jumping straight at me and attacking. I knew there was a chance they’d get hurt if I dodged and they missed their landing, so I hurriedly opened my arms wide to catch the two of them instead.

“Just like I thought, Yukiki—no, Hero Yuki! I knew you would do just that! It’s your turn again, ReiRei, RuiRui, RohRoh!”

Instantly, the wraith sisters surrounded me, hugging me so tight I couldn’t move.

“Good! That’s it!”

“Whaaat?!”

Last up was Demon Lord Magical Girl Iluna herself. Aiming for my torso, she flew at me. Unable to take a single step since I was already bogged down by the other five, her launching herself at me meant I fell backward, weighed down by six little girls.

“How’s that, Hero Yuki?! Do you surrender?!”

“You surrender?!”

“Victory is ours...”

Demon Lord Magical Girl Iluna and Demon Lord Magical Girl Shii stared down at me triumphantly from their respective spots on my chest. While they cheerfully ordered me to surrender, Demon Lord Magical Girl En raised one of her hands and made the V sign.

“Grr... Fine, I concede that you’re all powerful. But this isn’t the end! Not by a long shot! Now it’s time for me to reveal my true strength in my second form! Bwa ha ha ha ha!”

“Eep!”

Okay, so there wasn’t any real change in my appearance, but I pretended to transform into my second form by dramatically leaping to a standing position. With the little girls still clinging to me, I immediately started spinning right then and there, making huge circles around the room.

“Ah ha ha ha ha! Amazing! This is amazing! More, Yukiki! More!”

“More, Master!”

They shrieked in delight. The wraith triplets used their entire doll bodies to convey their joy since they couldn’t speak.

“Bwa ha ha ha ha! Y’all better hold on tight!”

Giving in to their demands, I spun them around countless times, cackling along with them. Then, finally, I crashed onto the carpet once more, pooped from the exercise.

“Ha ha ha! Daaang, I’m so dizzy. You girls all right?”

“We’re fine! It was sooo much fun!”

“Yes...”

“Yup! So fun! Heeey! Lady Lefifi! You come too!”

Beaming happily, Shii called out to my lady, who’d been watching us in fond exasperation after finally recovering from the little girls’ tickle attack.

“Yeah, she’s right, Lefi. Come over here. Your dearly beloved husband has a vacant arm with your name on it, y’know.”

“Hmph. How foolish.”

Or so she said, but she still quickly made her way over and sat down in a free space not too far from us.

“Whoa, you didn’t even try to argue your way out this time. Am I losing my mind or something?”

I was honestly a bit confused by Lefi’s unexpected meekness, so of course I asked her about it. Her answer was that she grinned evilly and pounced on me, wrapping her arms around me and holding me down.

“Now is the time! I have restrained him, so tickle him to your hearts’ desire!”

“Ah, wait, ladies— Bah ha ha ha! Hee hee hee hee!”

At Lefi’s instruction, the little girls came back and instantly went on the attack again, their tiny hands doing their damndest to tickle me to death. I wanted to escape, but sadly for me, Lefi was using all her power as the Supreme Dragon to pin me down, so I couldn’t budge at all.

“S-Stop! Time out! Wai— Eek! Seriously, hold it! Please, I’m begging you!”

“Bah! I, too, suffered gravely under their dastardly ministrations! So much so that I could scarcely breathe! I cannot abide you laughing so foolishly; therefore, you will know my agony! Demon Lord Magical Girls, show no mercy! Justice is our ally!”

“Gaaah! Ngh! Ha ha! L-Lefi! Y-You little— Pfft! I’ll remember— Hee hee hee hee hee!”

“Aha! This is the spot, is it not?! It is!”

Her legs clamped tight around my body as she skillfully used them to hold me down. Hands free to do whatever she wanted, Lefi joined the little girls in their tickle attack, grinning maniacally while she did.

“Mpf! Y-You’re the...hero’s servant, dammit! How dare you betray your master?!”

“After the Demon Lord Magical Girls defeated me, they converted me to their cause! Now, I offer my life in service of their goal to defeat the evil you spread in this world through your very existence!”

“Damn, woman, how faithless can you be?!”

For cripes’ sake, you only lost because they lured you in with a ghost cake! You could’ve recovered and gotten back at them, but nooo.

“Tch! Gah ha! Hee hee! I guess...I have no choice...left, except— Young ladies! Tell me, what snacks do you desire today?!”

The little girls had been diligently focused on their attack, but they froze instantly when I asked that question.

“Wh-Whatever is the matter with you all?! Why have you stopped?”

Lefi raised her voice in confusion, seeing the girls suddenly not obeying her.

“Now that I have your attention, let me propose an alliance! If you would lend me your aid in punishing the blackguard who betrayed me, I’ll give you whatever treats your little hearts desire. What say you? Of course, in lieu of food, I’ll give you wraith sisters all the magic you can devour.”

“Yaaay! Yukiki, I want chocolate cornets!”

“Donuts...”

“Me want magic too!”

While the three older girls squealed to show their excitement, the wraith triplets did the same by whizzing in the air delightedly. Magical energy equaled nutrition for dungeon summons, so magic was their favorite “food.” In general, giving magic to someone else involved aligning your own magical wavelength to theirs before you could transfer the energy. TBH, it was kind of a difficult task.

Of course, it was another story entirely concerning me and my dungeon monsters Shii and the wraith sisters. I myself had been born from the dungeon, and so had they. In short, the quality of our respective magical energies resembled each other extremely closely, and that meant it was super easy for me to pour my magic into them.

“Dwaaah?! Y-Yuki, that is grossly unfair!”

“Bwa ha ha ha ha! The one who commands the little girls comes out the victor! You missed your chance, Lefi, and you have only yourself to blame!”

And so, I turned the tables on her in an instant. Now that the girls were on my side, I surged up, letting Lefi tumble to the floor. Then, my new allies and I proceeded to tickle her delicate, slender body.

“Wah ha ha! Tee hee hee! W-Wait! I-I apologize! I beg your forgiveness, so cease at once!”

“Whale, whale, whale, what do we have here? A groveling, sniveling dragon, eh? But you have another thing coming if you truly think you’ll be forgiven with such a trifling apology! You betrayed the charismatically evil Hero Yuki, and as such, I will have you accept a punishment suitable for such a vile deed!”

“Gah ha! N-Not my tail! No!”

“Ha ha, how does it feel?! I know all your weaknesses!”

Naturally, Lefi could easily shake us off and break away if she got

serious. Too bad for her that I wasn't the only one here. If she went all out, there was a good chance she'd injure the little girls, so she and I both knew she couldn't resist the way she would've liked to. *Am I a strategy genius or what? Brute force ain't the only way to win.*

I had an uneasy feeling when I thought about the picture we made. A seemingly young girl pushed down by a young man who relentlessly toyed with her and trailed his fingers all over her body. It was some seriously dangerous stuff. But I couldn't think too hard about it, so never mind. Anyway.

Bwa ha ha ha! Suffer the pain I inflict and sink into the abyss of despair!

A few minutes later. Lefi's efforts to resist as me and the girls ruthlessly messed with her body had ended futilely. She was a pitiful sight to behold as she lay collapsed on the floor—her dress was a hot mess and drool was dripping from the corner of her mouth. Every time I poked her in a random spot, she would shudder a little. I found it extremely...sexy.

"Okaaay, everybody, food's done. Oh my gosh! Wh-What the heck happened here? Lady Lefi's breathing doesn't sound right."

Lew peeked out from the kitchen with that info, then abruptly cried out in shock at what she saw.

"Yeah, don't worry about it, Lew. We just finished exacting retribution on a villain."

"Begone, evil!"

"Bee-gone!"

Iluna and Shii energetically pumped their fists into the air. *So cute.*

"Uh...I see, I guess. I-In any case, lunch'll be ready soon, so just keep that in mind, please."

"Roooger that. All righty, ladies, let's wash up and set the table."

"Okaaay!"

Iluna and Shii shouted in unison.

"Okay..."

Once I saw the girls skip away to help Lew and Leila, I turned my gaze toward the silver-haired dragon girl still lying on the floor.

"C'mon, Lefi. It's lunchtime."

"Y-You scoundrel. Y-You have some n-nerve standing there ever so calmly after what you did to me. Have you no shame?"

"Now, now, let's all just calm down before we lose our cool. And by 'we' I mean me, because your sass is making me wanna mess with you again. Bet you'd like another round of tickling, huh?"

"Eeeep! N-No, I would not. You have made yourself clear, so I demand that you cease jabbing me at once. I-I will do as you say."

Her back arched real hard and she pleaded with me, her eyes

slightly teary, when I prodded at her body.

“...”

“Ugyah?! I-I told you I would do as you say! Why do you still insist on toying with my person?!”

“I dunno, but seeing you like this makes me wanna tease you even more. You could say my libido’s running riot.”

“Are you some sort of ogre?!” Lefi screeched in astonishment. I laughed in response and held my hand out toward her.

“Ha ha! Okay, okay, I’m sorry. Here, get up. It’s time to eat.”

“...You glib, arrogant scoundrel.”

She grabbed my hand while glaring judgmentally at me. In return, I could feel my grin widening as I shrugged my shoulders at her. Then, I tugged her to her feet.

Chapter 2: The Tournament: Desteatrom

“So, Haloria, what exactly should I be doing?”

My go-to attendant during my time in the demon world had tagged along today too, and she was ready with an answer to my question.

“First, we’ll complete your registration at the reception area by the arena’s entrance. Once that’s accomplished, your matches will be selected totally at random. As the Demon King himself has no authority to intervene in the decision-making process, please make sure to obey the venue staff’s instructions throughout the duration of the tournament.”

“Uhhh, if I remember right, the preliminaries are battle royale-style, yeah?”

“Correct. Around forty contenders will participate at once in each preliminary. The last three left standing at the end will be selected to move to the next phase.”

“Forty people, huh? That’s kind of a lot...”

“Well, there are many keen on participating, so you can understand the necessity of whittling down the numbers. Although I’m sure the preliminary round will pose no challenge for someone of your caliber.”

Yeah, yeah, I’ll do the best I can and live up to your and the King’s expectations.

We were currently in a specific section of the demon world’s royal capital, in front of a circular arena twice as tall as the buildings surrounding it. It looked a whole lot like the Colosseum that existed back on Earth, and right now, its front plaza was full of people. I saw what looked to be other contestants as well as regular folks who’d come to spectate all around us. *Reminds me of the one time I went to watch a professional baseball game back in my old life. Kinda nostalgic, huh?*

“A few of our people managed to infiltrate the venue staff. Should you have any questions or concerns, please make sure to ring the bell I provided to you. When you do, one of our people will immediately hasten to your side.”

“Oh, right, the bell that doesn’t actually make any sound.”

Before we’d left the demon world’s castle, she’d given me a special

bell that, when I put my magical energy into it, would convert the magic into a specific magical wavelength and emit it into the air. It didn't ring no matter how hard I shook it, but it had a counterpart attuned to it that supposedly made a tinkling sound the moment it detected the specific wavelength activated by the bell it was paired with. In short, it was an item possessing almost the exact same function as the Comm Orbs I'd given Nell.

Also, just like the ring I could use to disguise myself, this bell product was apparently used exclusively by folks that stood at the top of the demon world's hierarchy. I was kinda curious now about what other interesting things they might use.

"Right, that reminds me. I should disguise myself a bit more before we go to the registration desk. Leila, sorry to leave you alone once I'm in there. If you ever feel like something bad's gonna happen, I want you to use the thing I gave you a while back and return to the dungeon right away."

"Understood, my lord. Best of luck in your matches, hm?"

Since we obviously couldn't be together after I fully disguised myself and headed inside, I deliberately hinted vaguely at the necklace designed to return her to the dungeon. Leila nodded, immediately understanding what I meant.

"Haloria, take care of Leila. Not sure what for, but she's apparently sorta famous, so make sure any nutjobs keep their distance."

"Leave it to me, Lord Yuki. I'll protect her even if it costs me my life."

Uh, if the situation gets that bad, Leila's just gonna run away, and you should too.

"Please follow me, Lord Yuki."

Haloria led me and En to a deserted corner hidden from view. There, I used my Maps and Scout skills to do a quick check of our surroundings. Once I'd confirmed that no one was paying any attention to us, I pushed some magic into my ring and changed my hair and eye colors to silver. Then, I pulled out the new mask I'd been using since arriving in the demon world out of Inventory and put it on.

"Okay, I'm all set now. En, time to do our jobs. I know you must be fed up with the nonstop work lately, and I'm sorry about that, but I can't put my true abilities on display without you."

You heard right. Recently, along with Haloria and the Demon King's other subordinates, I'd been destroying the enemy's bases one after another as part of a harassment strategy. Naturally, I took En along on all our little trips, so it had basically been twenty-four seven work for the two of us for a few days now.

“It’s fine... I’m happy just being with you, Master.”

The kimono-clad little girl’s reply came with a touch of shyness in her usually stoic expression. *Gaaah, how much more adorable can she be? Does another living thing as cute as her exist in this world? Obviously not. That was a rhetorical question.* I gently rubbed her head and continued speaking, a smile on my face.

“Thanks, En. Being with you makes me super happy too. You sure you’re gonna be okay in your greatsword form for a while?”

“Yes...”

She gave me a small nod and touched her real body: the sword, Zaien, I had in one of my hands. When she did, she disappeared as if she’d fused into the blade.

“All right, let’s do this.”

Hoisting my beloved sword onto my shoulder, I stepped out of the shadowy corner, ready to get to work.

“Good morning. I see you’re a contestant, so please present your registration document.”

A young demon woman sporting horns and a tail manned the reception desk in front of the arena entrance. I pulled out a registration card-like document from one of my pockets and handed it to her.

“Please allow me a moment to verify this. Lord Upsilon, is it? Your hometown is here, the city of Leigeghegg, and your weapon is a greatsword...which I presume is the one you’re holding, yes? Oh my, how incredible. You’re participating in this tournament upon the recommendation of the King himself?”

I inclined my head in response to her question. Upsilon was the alias I’d been using since coming to the demon world. I’d picked it because in German, “upsilon” referred to the letter “Y.” As easy to remember as it was to use.

“Tee hee, I’m very much looking forward to your performance, sir. Now then, in order to verify that you are who you say you are, would you please pour your magic into the registration document?”

She returned the card to me and, doing as she requested, I pushed my magic into it. The card glowed briefly, indicating I was the person listed on it. *But dang, they really are serious when it comes to identity checks.* I’d honestly thought their management system would be a lot more slipshod, making it easy for substitutes or pretenders to take the place of the real contenders. Based on what I was going through now, though, that didn’t seem to be the case.

That said, it was clearly possible for contestants to manipulate the system by registering in advance, either on their own or if they were entered by someone else. For example, me. Not only was my name

fake, but my hometown was too.

“Excellent, thank you very much. I can confirm you’re on the tournament roster as well. Now then, please hold on to this numbered tag.”

The receptionist handed me a square wooden stick with the number 113 on it. Size-wise, it was about twice as big as a tube of lip balm. I’d have to be careful not to lose it.

“Your number will be used to summon you to the area for a match, so please make sure you don’t misplace it. As far as the contestant waiting rooms are concerned, you’ll find them beyond the end of that hallway. Staff will be waiting farther down to provide instructions, so please make sure to comply accordingly. And with that, the formalities are complete! I wish you a great tournament, Lord Upsilon!”

She bowed her head slightly and I casually raised my hand to thank her. Then, I left the crowded entrance and headed inside the arena. Instead of following the path that would lead me toward the spectator seating, I took the side corridor the receptionist had pointed out.

Finally, I can get away from the huge crowd. I didn’t have to walk too far before I met an old man who asked me if I was a contestant. I nodded and showed him my registration card.

“Every room beyond this point is a waiting room for contestants, so please enter whichever one suits your fancy. The only ones off-limits are the ones with placards that say ‘Full Occupancy’ in red letters.”

I wondered if that meant they had large waiting rooms for several people instead of individual ones for each challenger. It made sense considering that the battle royale-style preliminary matches were specifically designed to reduce the number of participants. After acknowledging the old man’s words, I walked past him and made my way deeper into the arena through the hallway. Once I found a room that wasn’t fully occupied, I opened the door and stepped inside.

Instantly, a bunch of stares stabbed into me. I looked around the room, surveying my opponents. A few of their glares could have killed me where I stood if they had that kind of power, while others were gazing at me with interest. I even noticed several people trying their hardest to fade into the background, not wanting to catch anyone’s attention. Energy and excitement subtly filled the air here.

Ahhh... Now this is what I’m talking about. I suddenly felt a little enthusiastic myself. This was how a days-long festival in the demon world’s royal capital was *supposed* to be. Unconsciously, I found the corners of my lips tugging up into a slight grin. Just as I sat down in an open spot in the huge waiting room, a voice boomed loudly

throughout the whole arena, probably enhanced by a magical device of some sort. Not even a few minutes had passed since I'd stepped inside.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you so very much for your patience. I'm pleased to announce that the 167th Desteia Trom tournament will now commence!”

On the heels of the host's announcement, the spectators roared in thunderous approval. Their cheers filled the entire arena.

“What's more, we'll be graced by both Demon King Fynar and Gozim, the leader of the fiends, this afternoon! Please give them a tremendous round of applause when they join us!”

Wait, what? Fynar's coming? I distinctly recalled him saying he'd be busy with business behind the scenes, but maybe showing his face here was part of his strategy. In that case... *Mm, very interesting. And the fiends' leader is coming too, eh?* The fact that their leader had been introduced together with Fynar, who sat at the top of the demon world's hierarchy, clearly indicated the power he held in this society. *I sure would love a chance to pay my deepest respects to this mystery man.*

Oh, right. It seemed I'd misunderstood the existence of the “fiends” for the longest time. Apparently, the term didn't actually designate a particular race. According to Lefi, the term “fiend” had originally described demon folks in ancient times, with its present-day usage referring to their descendants. Modern fiends considered themselves above everyone else because of their self-proclaimed superior bloodlines that granted them great power. Wouldn't you know it, they cared more about pedigree than anything else, and that mindset influenced their values.

Those extremely self-satisfied, arrogant folks attracted others to their attitude and way of life. They accepted these newcomers into the fold, saying, “You're now a fiend as well, because you, too, possess an outstanding bloodline,” while those who refused to align themselves with them were despised as “the weak bereft of superior bloodlines.” Hence, with the descendants of the original fiends as the center of their makeshift group, the fiends grew, spreading their might extensively. That was how we'd ended up with the current incarnation of the people known as “fiends.”

Even if a race had the word “daemon” in it, that didn't necessarily mean they were allied with the fiends. Thinking about it now, I realized that that made sense, with Fynar himself being proof positive. Despite his race being “Weiser Daemon King,” he was most definitely *not* a friend of the fiends. While these thoughts ran through my head, I continued listening to the emcee's words. A moment later, the door to the waiting room opened with a clatter and a staff member appeared, holding what appeared to be the contestant roster.

“Please consider me your guide for the coming events!”

The staff member had arrived to tell us the order of our matches. Numbers 1 through 40 would participate in the first preliminary bout, 41 through 80 in the second, and so on. Basically, rounds were divided into groups of forty.

“So we’re up third, huh?”

Since, y’know, my number was 113. En responded telepathically.

“We are...third?”

“Yup, looks like it. Meaning that the soonest we’ll be out there is midday, maybe even later in the afternoon.”

From what I’d heard, each qualifying round took about an hour or two. I figured it was right around ten in the morning, so if the first two preliminary matches lasted an hour each, the third would begin right around noon. *Hmm. Not sure how I feel about fighting in such a weird time slot.*

“I’m...going to be very hungry.”

“Ha ha! Ain’t that the truth. Once this is over, let’s meet up with Leila and stuff ourselves with lots of delicious food, okay?”

“Yes... I’m excited.”

As I talked to my sword, I didn’t even notice the folks in my vicinity staring at me uneasily, like they were watching something creepy. I whiled away the next ten minutes or so chatting with En.

“It’s now time for the first preliminary match!”

The deafening, frenzied bellows of the audience reverberated throughout the stadium as the first group of contenders entered the arena. And so, the tournament, rife with intrigues of all sorts, began.



“Hmm...”

“Hmm...”

En echoed my sentiment telepathically. Today’s matches were group preliminaries, and the real, one-on-one fights would start tomorrow. Additionally, anyone who’d made it through the first round of the real fights in previous tournaments was seeded, meaning they didn’t have to take part in the prelims.

I noted that to make just one point: weak. Just about everybody fighting in today’s matches was weak. Having forty people face off against each other at one time was certainly showy and entertaining as hell, but frankly speaking, the level of actual fighting skill was pretty damn low.

Most likely due to demons’ fundamental strength, everyone pretty much just went at each other directly. Punch, get punched. Punch, get punched. Just your normal offense and defense, nothing too special.

By no means did I claim to be an expert on combat or anything, so

I had no standing to comment on other peoples' abilities or talents. I had even less right considering that my fighting principle relied on bulldozing my opponents through brute force. But if I had to judge the average level of power among the preliminary round participants, I'd say the holy knights I'd fought alongside in the humans' royal capital beat them by a huge margin. No contest.

Granted, the holy knights were an elite unit even by human standards—the *cream* of the cream of the crop. That was one reason this group of contenders didn't stack up well. Another was that anyone could enter this tournament, with these prelims being how they separated the men from the boys, so to speak. Still, though, the strength gap kinda surprised me...but maybe that was a testament to human capacity. They most likely focused on skill and technique to compensate for their inherently lower physical abilities compared to other races.

"Master...you and I are stronger."

"Yeah, we really are. That doesn't mean we can let our guard down, though. There might be somebody super strong."

"Yes... You can be very absentminded and reckless, Master, so I was told I should always be on high alert. Don't worry, I'll pay close attention."

"Uhhh, thanks, I guess? By the way, mind telling me who said that to you?"

"Lady Lefifi..."

Oh, uh... Huh. Lefi said that, did she? Welp, now I know exactly what to do when we get home. As punish—er, as a reward for worrying about me, I'm gonna fondle her horns, wings, and tail to my heart's content. I can't wait to see her tear up from my retribu—I mean, my gratitude. While I mulled over my plans upon our return, the emcee made an announcement. Seemed the second preliminary round was over.

"We will now begin the third qualifying event! Contestants, please make your way to the stage!"

Time to finally make my debut. I filed out of the waiting room along with a bunch of others who seemed to be participating in the third match. Outside, a massive arena awaited us. The moment I set foot on the battleground, a crazy fervor slammed into me. I didn't know how to describe the energy surrounding us, but even though the waiting room was only a few steps away, it felt like I'd traveled to a whole other dimension.

When I casually glanced up, I saw a humongous crystal ball floating in the air. Projecting a magnified view of the arena, it was as big as an electronic scoreboard at a baseball field. The sight of the device stunned me, to be honest. That something so technologically advanced could exist here just emphasized how bizarre this world

was.

“It seems our contenders are ready! Now, let’s commence with round three!”

Clang! A gong echoed through the stadium, and it seemed to light a fire in all the fighters. I could feel the audience’s enthusiasm shooting up too, in response to the change in the atmosphere. It wasn’t long before I heard angry voices and the clash of weapons resounding around me.

“Get ready to die!”

“Rot in hell, boy!”

All of a sudden, I realized that the owners of those voices—along with a few others—were coming right for me. Since I’d just been standing around and observing, they probably figured I was a sitting duck. Every inch of them oozing fighting spirit, they raised their weapons high and charged straight toward me.

Let’s get this over with quick. Both lunch and Leila are waiting. I didn’t even bother to take up a fighting stance as I watched the group rush toward me. Instead, I inhaled deeply, and...

“Grrraaahhh!”

I howled. An echoing bellow so powerful it shook the ground and even the air, almost like it was a roaring thunderbolt. The challengers who heard it began dropping like flies, starting with the ones closest to me. Not long after, all my opponents lay unconscious; I was the only one left standing in the arena. In a heartbeat, the stadium went from deafening to dead silent.

It was all thanks to my special ability, Ruler’s Might, which I’d gotten after killing that dickbag dragon. When it was activated, it unleashed the user’s “might” at all enemies within a designated radius, massively dulling their movements. Yup, its primary function was just to *weaken* an opponent. But if the disparity between the user’s stats and their targets’ was big enough, the ability could weaken them to the point of making them faint.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What an incredible display of power! Th-The match has ended with a single roooar!”

At the emcee’s astonished comment, the crowd recovered from the complete and utter silence that followed my howl and drowned the stadium in ardent cheers once more. *Hell to the yes.* I mentally patted myself on the back because I had, without a doubt, successfully completed the first part of the assignment the Demon King had given me: standing out.

But this is just the beginning. Mwa ha ha ha, keep your eyes on me, folks. You ain’t seen nothing of a demon lord’s power yet.

And so, without me even taking En out of her sheath, my first match ended.

Two men stood in one of the several corridors situated inside the arena that led to the audience seating. Because a match was in progress, the hallway was essentially devoid of people. These men showed no signs of enthusiasm or interest as they observed the stage with sharp eyes.

“Who is that masked individual?”

“He was suddenly squeezed into the tournament roster a few days ago at Fynar’s behest. Presumably, his birthplace is Leigeghegg, but I suspect that’s a lie.”

“Might he be ‘The Unknown’ Lord Derwes mentioned?”

“It’s very likely, yes. If we definitively determine that he is, in fact, The Unknown, then we expect him to boast considerable talents.”

“Was he sent in to crush our lineup of contenders in the tournament, or to serve as a distraction so Fynar could work his schemes in the shadows? I wonder...”

As of now, every one of their strategies had failed spectacularly. Operating under the assumption that the enemy was a force to be reckoned with, they had conducted countless reconnaissance missions to gather information. And on the basis of said intel, their operations had mainly utilized excessive force.

They were both well aware that Demon King Fynar wasn’t an opponent they could outmaneuver through ordinary methods. They also understood that he could never be underestimated. Even so, their failure rate as of late was a bit *too* high. Case in point, their most recent large-scale assault had ended up being colossally unsuccessful. Although not much information from the leadership had been coming down the pipeline since then, perhaps to avoid creating confusion in the ranks, there was nonetheless a rumor that one of their top brass had been captured.

That could only mean Fynar was undoubtedly devising some new measures to sabotage them. Yet despite knowing all this, the situation wasn’t improving for them whatsoever. Possibly owing to the Demon King’s exhaustive information control, they had been unable to get their hands on any data about his plans. They had even lost contact with all the members of the reconnaissance unit deployed to probe into the matter.

Consequently, very much in the dark, they had dubbed Fynar’s new strategy “The Unknown” and continued their investigation. But now...

“Do you have any conjectures on his true identity?”

“The Analysis team has been fully mobilized to look into him, but as of yet, we don’t have any details.”

“Our failures thus far have been wholly out of our control, no?”

Nevertheless, any obstacle in our path is to be summarily eliminated. Should this masked man pose a serious hindrance to us, make sure he disappears before the real fights begin.”

“Understood—”

“Well, now. What a terribly unsettling conversation you seem to be having.”

Without warning, someone spoke from behind them.

“Ngh!”

One of the two men pulled a knife from within his clothing as he turned around. He decided to attack first and ascertain the identity of the mysterious hooded figure behind them later. The fiend’s flowing, slashing attack...never found its mark, because the arm holding the knife dropped to the ground with a soft *thud*. It had been precisely severed from his trunk by the hooded individual, who was gripping a now-blood-spattered sword.

“Agyaaaahhh?!”

The man screamed in horror, his reaction slightly delayed. But his shriek was drowned out by the spectators’ frenzied roars, so no one except the three of them heard it. No one noticed the tragedy unfolding either.

“Tch!”

“Please don’t try to run away. You’ll only make me angry, you know.”

Seeing how capable the hooded individual was, the man’s comrade decided to abandon him in an attempt to escape. However, he only managed to take one step away from the scene before his head was separated neatly from his body, just like his companion’s arm had been. While blood sprayed from the hole in his neck, the man’s knees buckled and he collapsed to the ground not far from where his head had rolled. Eventually, his prone body lay motionless.

“Eep—”

“Oh, I won’t kill you, so you can relax. After all, I have *many* questions to ask you, which means you’ll need to be alive to answer them, hm? Though I must admit, my work is progressing quite smoothly thanks to him.”

Cackling, the hooded person grabbed the frightened man by the scruff of his neck. In the next instant, his comrade’s corpse, every trace of blood, the now one-armed man himself, and the hooded individual all vanished from sight.



“You... You are really much too rash, aren’t you, Lord Yuki?”

“I’m just doing what your king asked, y’know?”

I responded to Little Miss Hood’s glare with a shrug.

“Well, true enough, I suppose. I certainly can’t think of any other way you could have made yourself more conspicuous. It wouldn’t be too much to say that you might have even *overdone* it. Although thanks to your theatrics, the enemy’s secret intelligence members all made their moves at once. I believe the king will see this as a golden opportunity to further our advantage.”

“So it’s all good then, right?”

“Indeed it is. I’m sure our king will take this chance to gleefully issue more instructions to each of us working under him despite being as understaffed and overworked as we are. A majority of my colleagues would be more than happy to give up their lives for the king, so in all likelihood, they’ll be overjoyed to receive more work. Of course, I would gladly sacrifice myself for the King as well, but I have to admit that I find this constant barrage of work draining...”

“Oh, uh... Sorry, I guess.”

In hindsight, ever since we’d arrived in the demon world, Haloria had been constantly attending to me and my little squad. On top of her role as our *de facto* caretaker, she also had to handle her primary duties as a member of the Covert Imperial Guard. She must’ve been working way more than I could begin to imagine. Taking all that into account, I suddenly felt really bad for her. *Hmm... I’ll give her a gift later to show my appreciation.*

“Please don’t concern yourself over it. As an ally, you went above and beyond in accomplishing your task, Lord Yuki. If anything, I sincerely apologize for letting my complaints slip out in such an unseemly manner.”

“Oh, yeah, not a problem at all. You can come to us for advice or whatever whenever you’re in a bind. Right, Leila?”

“That’s right. I’d be more than happy to counsel you, Haloria.”

“Ah... Thank you very much, Lady Leila.”

Haloria looked deeply moved by Leila’s words. What I saw in her eyes as she stared at my maid could very well be described as worship. *W-Well, I’m just happy they get along.* I found myself smiling ruefully as I watched them. They’d clearly developed a friendship of sorts without my knowledge.

Then, I stabbed my fork into the gargantuan steak in front of me and sunk my teeth into it. The oozing juices filled my mouth while I chomped down enthusiastically. En sat next to me, huffing air in and out of her tiny mouth to cool down her own steak as she happily stuffed her face. *So cute.*

We were currently in a section of the stadium seating Haloria had secured for us. The reason it was “a section” and not just “seats” was because all the actual seats in this particular zone were reserved for VIPs. And by VIPs, I meant the demon world’s aristocrats and such.

Unsurprisingly, the service here was insanely good. Maids were stationed all around and would immediately bring whatever anyone wanted. If they didn't have it on hand, they'd go out to buy it.

The steaks we were munching on right now were a great example of the staff's attentiveness. They'd been freshly prepared by the chefs hard at work in the kitchen behind the scenes. I'd been amazed to learn that the tournament's management had hired those chefs from a bunch of high-end restaurants specifically to serve the distinguished guests.

"What a fearsome individual that masked man was. I wonder who exactly he is."

"If the rumors are to be believed, he's a mercenary the king employed recently."

"A mercenary, eh? Do you think he'd work for me too if I paid him handsomely?"

"Not anytime soon, I'd wager. I heard he's exclusively under the king's protection for the foreseeable future."

Two demon nobles conversed with each other, sitting a bit of a distance away from us. I sneaked a peek at them, then spoke to Haloria.

"Looks like a certain someone's handiwork is proceeding according to his plan."

"Naturally. My lord would never leave any stone unturned when it comes to his designs. Once our king makes his move, the enemy will fall into his trap without even realizing it was laid. And just like that, they'll meet their end. From this point forward, I anticipate developments occurring at a vastly accelerated pace."

Good to know. By the way, I currently wasn't wearing my disguise, which meant none of the demons in attendance knew I was the masked man in the tournament. They didn't know my true identity either.

"Is it really okay for your exalted king to be here even though he's working so many strategic angles?"

"His presence here is unavoidable, and we have a good reason for it, unfortunately. Since the leader of the fiends will be descending on the arena, the king has no choice but to come as well."

Ohhh, I get it. He must wanna keep the enemy in check. Because who'd want someone talking shit about them when they weren't around to defend themselves, right? Apparently, as far as the discord between the fiends' faction and the king's faction was concerned, how much destruction each side could do to the other's reputation was vitally important. That made it extremely necessary for both leaders to present themselves at a public event like this. In other words, it was a propaganda war.

If the antagonism between the two sides got any stronger, it would inevitably result in direct, armed confrontation. And the Demon King wanted to settle things before things reached that point. Just as that thought ran through my mind, the emcee's voice rang throughout the stadium.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I apologize for interrupting your meal! I'd like to inform you that our two guests of honor, the ones I mentioned this morning, have just arrived! Everyone, please give a tremendous round of applause for these esteemed individuals!”

Urged by the host, the audience clapped loudly, the sound enveloping the stadium. The massive crystal ball hovering over the arena began broadcasting an image of the Demon King's magnified face as he beamed his usual sunny smile. When I glanced around trying to find his actual location, I realized that he'd appeared without warning in an excessively gorgeous area of the stadium. *He wasn't there just a second ago, that's for damn sure.*

The moment he showed up on the crystal ball screen, a mix of delighted squeals from women and jealous booing from men erupted from the stands. *Interesting...* This reaction made it easy to figure out where he stood with the citizens of the demon world. Even I could grudgingly admit that the dude's well-defined, symmetrical face made him a looker, so the two different reactions weren't really surprising.

“Hellooo, everyone. I'm Fynar. I sincerely hope you enjoy the tournament tremendously. Truth be told, I have a particular favorite entered in the event this time that I love boasting about. So please *do* keep your eyes on this young man and *relish* his antics!”

So saying, Fynar suddenly looked straight at me, grinning broadly. *Well, jeez, thanks for the promo, man.*

“Thank you very much for such a rousing greeting, Lord Fynar! The king must surely be referring to the mysterious masked contestant who ended the match with a single roar. He didn't even unsheathe his sword during his preliminary bout, so I find myself quite eager to see what he'll do next! Thank you once more, Lord Fynar. Everyone, please give our king another tremendous round of applause!”

The sound of clapping filled the arena again.

“Let's now welcome our other honored guest! Ladies and gentlemen, please focus your attention on the crystal ball projection!”

As the emcee said those words, the next image was displayed by the crystal ball monitor. It was of a lone man with close-cropped red hair. His sharp gaze was very similar to that of a bird of prey, and his

mouth was big like a snake's. He had to be at least two meters tall, if not taller. Even dressed as he was in multiple layers of clothing, his muscles bulged and rippled powerfully through the fabric. The word "giant" described him perfectly.

"Awoooo!"

The moment *this* man appeared on-screen, almost all the men in the stadium howled ferociously as if they were letting out a war cry. Next to me, En, who'd been happily chomping away at the meat on her plate, suddenly flinched. I figured the abrupt increase in volume had startled her.

Goddammit, you assholes. Don't you dare scare my little girl. I'll kill every last one of you.

"Friends!"

Just a single word from him and the arena instantly fell silent. The audience waited with bated breath for what he would say next.

"My name is Gozim and I'm grateful for your cheers of welcome. Heed me well, my friends, for I seek only one thing from you all during this rite of strength: to enjoy this banquet of warriors to the fullest!"

The man, Gozim, thrust a fist triumphantly into the air. In return, he received a thunderous round of applause from the audience—mostly the men—that was much, much louder than the claps they'd given Fynar. The sound was so intense that it practically shook the ground.

So that's the fiends' leader, huh? His stats...were totally blocked to me. I couldn't see squat. He was either using some kind of insanely powerful magical device that created a barrier against magic directed at him or he had an ability that countered Analysis.

I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but for some reason, he seemed to fit the demon lord mold way better than I did. He had charisma in spades and a jacked, tough build suitable for a demon lord.

Crud, this is bad. I'm suddenly having an identity crisis because of him. You know what, though? I'ma remember your face, jerkoff. The face of a man who's more demon lord-like than I am. And soon enough, I'll show you real good that I'm a true demon lord too.

"Been some time since we last met, Fynar. Looking spineless as ever, eh?"

"It has *indeed* been a while, Gozim. And I see *you* are looking as *dumb* as ever. It's as if your brain *itself* has been *infected* by your profusion of *muscles*."

Though the head of the fiends spoke derisively and with a sneer, Demon King Fynar answered him in kind, his ever-present smile on his

face.

“Hah, your defiant attitude remains unchanged. You’re still the only man with the guts to say such words to me.”

“Oh, is that *so*? How *sad* for you. Seems you need more *friends*, hm? You’ll be *glad* to know that I *surround* myself with *wonderful* children who *always* give me their *honest* opinions, especially about *me*.”

“You obviously haven’t realized that’s just your subordinates’ way of holding you in contempt. All I can feel is sorry for a man like you, but I find myself pitying those who continue to follow a boy like you even more.”

“Well, I *firmly* believe such people are *preferable* to a certain *imbecile’s* followers. The *same* one who’s *mistaken* blind obedience by *his* subordinates for true *loyalty*.”

Each continued hurling insults at the other as their verbal battle went on. Fynar, normally quite mild-mannered, couldn’t stop himself from adding fuel to the fire.

“Hmph. I wonder how long you’ll be able to keep up that brave front. Tell me, how far do you think your mercenary of dubious origins, the one you hired without considering your reputation, will advance in the tournament? I’d guess not very.”

“I do *so* appreciate your *kindness* in worrying about him. But your *warm* concern is entirely *unnecessary*, so no need to *tax* yourself. Because he’s *much* more powerful than your precious, cherished *pawns*.”

“You dare ridicule my brethren, you brat?!”

The announcer hadn’t heard a single word of the exchange between the Demon King and the leader of the fiends because the spectators’ cheers were just too loud. They turned toward the two of them with a smile, their voice raised loud enough to be heard over the energetic shouts of the audience.



“Right, then! As we discussed in advance, won’t you both shake hands in a show of good faith for the spectators?!”

When the emcee turned around, the head of the fiends immediately took control of his emotions, clearing the enraged expression from his face. Then, as requested, he and the Demon King shook hands. One man’s smile was ghastly while the other’s was mocking.

“Well, Fynar, I wish you every success. I’m looking forward to seeing a coward like you crumble in disgrace.”

“And the *best* of luck to *you* too, Gozim. A *word* of advice, hm? *Don’t* think you will be the *same* once this tournament ends.”

On the surface, the two of them seemed friendly enough. But the spectators, blissfully unaware of the reality, roared in approval at the sight of them shaking hands.



The day after the preliminaries, which had ended without incident. Mask on, hair and eye colors changed, I took the stage with En hefted onto my shoulder in her original greatsword form.

“First up for our next bout, we have this man! The assassin sent in by the king himself! The contender who charged his way through his qualifying match with a single bellow! He didn’t even unsheathe his weapon yesterday! Ladies and gentlemen, what sort of battle will this incredibly enigmatic man show us today?! Please welcome Upsilon to the arena!”

Everyone in attendance cheered enthusiastically, encouraged by the emcee’s introduction.

“And his opponent! A ten-time participant in the Desteia Trom tournament who’s made it through to the main matches all ten times! Possessed of undeniable power, this veritable giant inevitably enchants scores of people with the diversity of his attacks! I wonder what techniques he’ll put on display in this fight! Please welcome Paraglo to the arena!”

“Paraglooo!”

“Tounce him, Paraglo!”

My opponent made his way into the arena from the entrance opposite mine. When he did, the stadium filled with cheers for him that were twice as loud as the ones for me had been. *All righty, then. Guess this means I’m a have to beat his ass.*

He looked way too much like a gorilla, and his slow, lumbering steps did nothing to change my impression. Once he stood facing me, he spoke to me in a deep, arrogant voice, breathing heavily through his nose.

“Ya...must be...feeling...proud of...yourself...for defeating...the small fry...in...the preliminary...eh?”

“...”

“But...I suggest...ya don’t...get...too big...for your britches. Because...everyone...in the...real fights...can easily...take down...losers that weak!”

“...”

“Hah... Ya...scared? Why don’t...ya...say something?”

“Hmm? Oh, sorry, dude. You’re breathing so hard that I couldn’t understand anything you just said. Mind running all that by me one more time, Mr. Gorilla?”

Yup, I dissed him right off the bat. *Heh heh heh, looks like the fight’s already started.* If that was enough to make him snap and lose his composure, then I could steal the win easy peasy.

“Ya...son of...a...!”

My verbal attack seemed effective, if the veins bulging in his head were anything to go by. Right when I saw them appear, I heard the *clang* of the gong signaling the start of the match. Immediately, Mr. Gorilla roared angrily and charged toward me, his pounding steps making the ground tremble. He pulled his arm back and swung his fist at me with all the force of a bullet being fired.

Mm... His only actual fighting equipment seemed to be brass knuckles, and considering how he used his body itself as a weapon, by all appearances, I figured he was a martial artist-type fighter.

The Demon King had specifically requested that I be as flashy as possible during this tournament and really make a show of myself. So to fulfill that goal, I decided to fight in a really performative way that would captivate people. *Time to go all out.*

“I’ll...make...mincemeat...outta ya!”

Mr. Gorilla’s enraged shout came with the added bonus of his fist hurtling straight toward my face. But his attack stopped before it could even reach me.

“What?!”

I’d stretched my arm out and blocked Mr. Gorilla’s fist with the palm of my hand.

“Oof. Ouch. It hurts. Owie. It’s my turn now, right?”

Grinning evilly under my mask, I slammed En, still in her scabbard, into his torso as payback. If I actually unsheathed her, I was pretty sure I’d end up killing him from the huge difference in our strength alone. Although technically pretty much anything went in this tournament, death was apparently a no-no. The minute someone killed their opponent, they lost by default on account of rule violation. I couldn’t get kicked out obviously, so anticipating that I’d be up against challengers considerably weaker than me for the remainder of

the tournament, I decided this would be the best way to fight.

“Ngh—”

Mowed down by a sheathed En, Mr. Gorilla gasped and bent forward, the air knocked out of him. Then, I kicked his legs out from under him, which sent him tumbling headfirst to the arena floor. Intent on making him pass the hell out, I stomped on his hairy face, the sensation of stepping on something hard super noticeable through the sole of my foot.

After I did what I needed to do and the cloud of dust settled, Mr. Gorilla lay there completely unconscious, his eyes rolled into the back of his head.

“Wh-What an amazing turn of events! Challenger Paraglo attacked first, yet he now finds himself insensate on the ground!”

Finally getting a grasp on the situation, the emcee spoke to the crowd, clearly stunned.

“Boooo!”

The audience, also coming to grips with what just happened, started booing me as I stood with my foot still on the gorilla’s face. In response, I kept my foot right where it was, stared directly at the spectators, and held up my free hand to flip them the bird, which riled them up even more.

“S-Such a fearsome man! His insolence knows no bounds as he kicks his opponent in the face while inciting everyone in attendance today!”

Holy shit. This is way too much fun. How the villain characters in pro wrestling felt when they played their parts made so much sense now. The freedom to do literally whatever I wanted, however I wanted was seriously a blast. I could definitely see it becoming a habit.

Maaan, I’m really not cut out to be a hero. No way, no how. Three cheers for the bad-guy life. And three more cheers for living life the way I want.

Victorious in my first real match of the tournament, I leisurely strolled off the stage, feeling incredibly refreshed and invigorated by the storm of booing.

“Time to summon one of Fynar’s people.”

Probably because I’d made it through the preliminaries and into the real part of the tournament, I’d been given my own private waiting room today. After I returned to it, I pulled the bell that didn’t ring out of Inventory and shook it from side to side. Immediately, it emitted a specific wavelength of magical energy. In the next moment, an empty space in a corner of the waiting room began to warp, steadily forming into a solid shape that finally became the figure of a

hooded man.

I know him. If I remembered right, he was the one who'd captured that super fast dude—the member of the enemy's top brass who'd tried to escape during the attack on The Four Races Alliance Summit. This guy had anticipated the enemy's route and gotten ahead of him.

“Woow... That's my first time seeing spatial magic. Pretty neat.”

“Now isn't that remarkable? And you've already discerned how it works, considering you knew exactly where I would appear.”

The hooded man had a wry smile on his face as he made that comment.

“Heh. I guess you could say I'm kinda good at figuring out stuff like that.”

It was all thanks to my Demon Eyes, which could see through anything containing magical energy. Out of all my abilities, I definitely considered it my top-ranked cheat skill. *I bow to you, O Gracious Demon Eyes.*

Name: Runougil

Race: Guardian Devil

Class: Silent Assassin

Level: 119

HP: 3,996 / 3,996

MP: 9,690 / 9,690

Strength: 1,001

Stamina: 992

Agility: 886

Magic: 1,002

Dexterity: 1,851

Luck: 199

Special Abilities: Spatial Magic, Sound Magic

Abilities: Stealth 6, Swordsmanship 8, Danger

Detection 6, Scout 5

Titles: The King's Right Hand, The Assassin, The Silencer

Hot damn, this guy's powerful as hell. Not counting the asshole dragon and the plethora of monsters I'd run into until now, he was for sure the strongest person I'd met. Based on what I'd just seen of his spatial magic, I was almost positive that defending against it would be impossible without prior experience. It seemed he'd combined its use with sound magic because it'd been dead silent when he'd appeared. *Looks like the Demon King has some formidable people working for him.*

“Well, then, Lord Yuki. To what do I owe the pleasure of your summons on this occasion?”

“Right, so, you guys might already know, but just in case you don’t, I wanted to let you know that there are a few people in the bleachers who were planning to attack me during my fight. Think you could get rid of them for me, like, ASAP?”

They were most likely members of the fiends. I suspected that they’d planned to take advantage of the confusion of battle to kill me, but I’d won before they could even make a single move against me. My Demon Eyes had picked them out of the crowd because they’d been waiting patiently the whole time with their magic activated in their bodies. Sucked for them that they hadn’t gotten to do jack shit.

“Incredible. You ascertained the threat to you even in the midst of combat? Would you kindly provide their exact location to me?”

“Uhhh, sure. We should be able to see them from here. First, that guy with the buzz cut sitting in the front section, third row from the top. Next, that man wearing glasses on the right side of the front section, sitting between the parents with their kids and the couple.”

I pointed out the enemies I’d discovered to the hooded man.

“And, hmm... I feel like there were a few more, but I can’t remember them. Sorry about that.”

“Not at all. You’ve been a tremendous help. Based on the information you just gave me, I think I can determine the other enemies’ locations myself. Rest assured that I’ll remove them promptly. Thank you very much for your cooperation.”

“Don’t even worry about it, man. Especially because you’re getting rid of them for my sake. I appreciate you handling the cleanup.”

I waved away his words with a casual flick of my hand. The hooded man inclined his head in understanding before he seemingly melted into space, vanishing from sight.



“And Upsilon wins again! Won’t a challenger present himself to stop this man’s steady advance through the ranks?!”

The spectators erupted into a frenzy of both cheers and boos when they heard the emcee’s live coverage. *Yes, good. The “make myself stand out” strategy is going off without a hitch.* Since the beginning of the main part of the tournament yesterday, I’d already won three matches in a row. For every one of my fights, I’d acted like an evil wrestler—the ones who’d shout stuff like, “Gah ha ha! You small fry really think you can take down a champion like me?!” Just to be clear, though, I didn’t *actually* say anything along those lines.

In any case, I played the role of the villain to the hilt, garnering as much hate as I could during each bout. Yet in a strange turn of events, I’d instead managed to gather a small but hardcore group of fans who’d taken a real liking to me.

There was also a direct correlation between my win count and the number of hostiles in the building dead set on getting in my way. The more matches I won, the more dots that showed up on Maps. Except I never had to lift a finger to handle the situation. Before I could even think about what to do about them, the Demon King's hooded subordinates expertly took them out in a jiffy. Having allies as outstanding as them made my life so much easier. Prior to my arrival in the demon world, I would've been more than content just acquiring intel on folks, but the fact that my new comrades turned out to be both totally normal *and* super capable was a massive help.

"So, En, whaddya think about this tournament?"

We'd gone back to my private waiting room not too long ago, and now, we were hanging out together on the sofa. En had transformed into her human form after we'd made sure no one else was around and was sitting next to me looking as dainty as ever.

"It's very loud..."

"Ha ha, you're totally right. Sometimes I almost feel like I can't hear myself think, it's so bad."

"And...I hate all those people making fun of you, Master."

Her anger leaked through a little bit, altering her expression slightly as she pointed at the audience visible from the waiting room.

"Mm. Okay, so, about that. Well, they only hate me because I've been acting like a jerkoff on purpose. I *want* them to hate me, which makes their reactions spot-on as far as I'm concerned, y'know?"

En must've been referring to the intense booing they'd directed at me. All the audience had done was go along with my villainous performance, so I couldn't really blame them. Each of us was playing our role, so to speak, which was the beauty of this whole thing. To be honest, I was actually grateful they were responding so naturally because it meant I didn't have to work as hard as I'd anticipated to pull off this "stand out" strategy.

"Oh, really...?"

"Yup. Think of it like the game we always play at home."

I was referring to Heroes and Demon Lords, where I played the role of a hero who met his demise at the hands of the Demon Lord Magical Girls.

"Then...you can't do that anymore, Master. I want you to be cool like a demon lord instead."

"Uhhh... Hmm. But I'm actually more of a demon lord *now*, if I'm being honest..."

"I don't care... I still forbid you from acting like a bad guy."

I let out a wry laugh and gently patted En on the head as she stared up at me, insisting stubbornly.

"Okay, okay. I'll try my best to be more of a demon lord you and

everyone else will think is cool.”

“Good...”

She nodded, satisfied, and her expression changed a bit to match. For a while after that conversation, we just sat on the couch in the waiting room and watched the other contenders’ fights. Then, there was a knock on the door.

Once En had returned to her greatsword form, I opened it. A young lady with horns and a tail stood outside. I guessed she was a member of the event staff.

“Lord Upsilon, your next bout is close at hand, so kindly proceed to the arena and wait by the entrance as soon as you’re ready!”

Guess it’s that time already, huh? While wearing my disguise during the tournament, I tried not to talk outside of matches, so I wiggled my fingers at her in acknowledgment of her notification. She didn’t turn around and walk away after I did, though. Instead, she just stood there, fidgeting restlessly.

I tilted my head, puzzled by her behavior. Finally coming to some sort of inner resolution, she abruptly whipped something out from behind her. For an instant, I had my guard waaay up thinking she was going to use a weapon, but...

“Um, hey! I just wanted to let you know that I-I found your fights extremely rousing to watch! Can I please have your autograph?!”

In her hands were an ink-soaked quill and a slightly stiff piece of parchment. The latter seemed to be this world’s version of those fancy shikishi boards people used back in Japan for autographs and such. *Well, shoot, is that all? And here I thought I’d have to put ‘em up. Wait, an autograph? Did I hear her right?*

I’d taken the parchment from her without giving it any thought, but I froze up as her words sank into my brain. *Hold on just a sec.* Having never autographed anything, I sure as hell didn’t have a special signature to use in a situation like this. *Th-This is a bit of a pickle, ain’t it?* I decided to weasel my way out of it for the time being by just straight-up writing “Upsilon.”

I pressed the parchment up against the wall, using it in lieu of a table, and scribbled my version of an autograph on it. When I handed it back to her, she shrieked in delight, shouting, “Thank you very much! You’re such an inspiration to me!” Then, she finally left in an excited rush.

“That was odd...”

“Hard agree.”

Wow. An autograph, huh? Maybe I should practice my signature? Even just a little bit?

I shook my head, clearing away the distracting thoughts so I could focus on the present. Doing as the event staff lady instructed, I headed

out of the waiting room and toward the arena. As I stepped into it, the energetic voices of the emcee and the audience greeted me.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to Upsilon’s next opponent! First and foremost, I suggest you not be fooled by his appearance! For you’ll soon find yourselves enraptured by his gorgeous bladework, reminiscent of the finest dancers! Despite being a first-time participant in this tournament as well, he has easily vanquished his opponents one after another thus far! Feast your eyes upon the talents of Lemiro Gilbert!”

On the heels of that introduction, which came right after mine, the person who stepped into the arena from the opposite entrance was...an old butler. Judging from his expression, he was a mild-mannered dude. Seemed on point for someone of his age. On the other hand, though, there was his posture. His spine was ramrod straight and he oozed unyielding determination from every pore, giving off an incredibly youthful impression that was totally at odds with the fact that he was pretty up there in years. *Wait a minute...*

“Hey, this might be a shot in the dark, but would you happen to be one of Nell’s friends?”

“Bravo. Then you are indeed the lady hero’s accomplice in the demon world.”

The butler had a dandy smile on his face as he spoke.

“Oh, snap. You realized?”

“I did, as she relayed to me a number of your unique characteristics. For example, your sword’s specific curvature and size, as well as the nonslip black-and-scarlet cord wrapped around its hilt. In short, your weapon itself presented more than enough evidence for me to presume you as her collaborator.”

Mm-hmm... Okay, gotcha. So En gave me away, did she? Ever since she’d gained a distinct sense of consciousness, I’d been keeping her in plain sight even when she was in her greatsword form instead of storing her in Inventory. Granted, I carried her around wrapped in cloth when she was, but I still had to take it off during combat, thus revealing my sword in all her glory.

While the old butler and I chatted, the referee must’ve decided we were both ready to go, because they sounded the gong. Our fight had officially begun.

“Ack, I would have enjoyed conversing a bit longer, but it seems I won’t be afforded the chance, hmm? Well, then, I have no choice but to leave our discussion for another time. I plan to utilize this opportunity to hone my own skills against a worthy opponent like yourself, so might you do me the honor of engaging me unreservedly?”

With that, the old guy unsheathed the rustic sword hanging from

his waist. At the same time, he unleashed his tremendous spirit and might. His persona did a complete one-eighty from the good-natured old man he'd been until just a moment ago. The sharp aura he was giving off now made him seem like a completely different person. I almost wanted to say that the force of his very presence had doubled, maybe even tripled.

“Cut the crap. It's so obvious that you have no intention of using me as just some sparring partner.”

“Oh, but I can assure you I do. Though I will admit that I find myself a mite curious about the extent of the lady hero's ally's true abilities.”

“So basically, you wanna test the both of us. That about right?”

“Well, that is indeed one way of phrasing it.”

There was a menacing grin on the geezer's face.

Name: Lemiro Gilbert

Race: Human

Class: Butler (Master Swordsman)

Level: 158

HP: 3,116 / 3,116

MP: 2,509 / 2,509

Strength: 994

Stamina: 992

Agility: 910

Magic: 606

Dexterity: 2,999

Luck: 155

Special Abilities: Mind's Eye

Abilities: Swordsmanship 10, Rapier Combat 7, Dagger Combat 7, Unarmed Combat 8, Danger Detection 7, Acumen 8

Titles: The Divine Sword, One Who Has Reached the Limit, One Who Defies Death

Any yo, what the hell? Any way you looked at it, I shouldn't have been facing an opponent on the level of this old fart when we were only at the midpoint of the main tournament. *This sucks. He's way too strong.* The Demon King's henchman, the assassin I'd met yesterday, had stats that were overall higher than this guy's, but there was no doubt in my mind that this butler outdid him in terms of swordsmanship. Like, seriously, he had that exact ability at level 10, for crying out loud. As in, it was maxed the frick out. Not to mention that all his other skills were level 7 at the *lowest*.

Plus, his real class, which he hadn't even Camouflaged, was

“Master Swordsman.” On *top* of that, his title, “The Divine Sword,” sounded insanely dangerous. *But wait, there’s more!* His Dexterity, the stat most relevant to Swordsmanship, was higher than all the others by a ridiculous amount. Long story short, I was in a hell of a bind.

Then there was his race. Probably because of his confidence in his own abilities, the dude didn’t even bother trying to hide the fact that he was human. My bet was that it was him being proactive. Even if he could’ve taken care of any trouble he might’ve gotten in for concealing it, he must’ve figured that it was easier and faster to have it out in the open from the get-go. In any case, it was obvious he believed in his own talents. His strategy made sense, in a way, since demons fundamentally prized power above all and he clearly wasn’t lacking in that department. Better to be up-front about it in this context.

Or maybe, just maybe, he had another reason for his tactic. By not hiding his true race as a human, he stood out all the more, making him the perfect cover. With all the attention on him, his allies could do their jobs in the shadows with a whole lot more safety. Was this the role he’d taken on for their mission? If you asked me, it was definitely possible. Considering what I’d gleaned of this old man so far, I wouldn’t have been surprised to learn that he’d willingly taken on the risk. After all, he knew he could easily handle any tricky situation he found himself in.

I could feel the foundation of my own standards for strength collapsing. This old butler’s existence alone had me questioning the very definition of it. *Damn, son. Guess that’s the demon world for ya.* Even though he wasn’t a demon.

In any case, I knew one thing for sure: I had zero chance of beating him in a sword fight. Sure, I whooped his ass up and down this arena in the way of stats, but that wouldn’t mean diddly-squat if he lopped off my head or stabbed me through the heart. Numbers were worthless when you were deader than a doornail.

Admittedly, I didn’t know *for sure* what would happen in a sword fight between the two of us since I’d never actually faced him before. For all I knew, I could even survive. But I had a pretty good idea that the outcome would be far from pleasant regardless, and I had no desire whatsoever to test that theory. I would gladly avoid fucking around if it meant I didn’t have to find out.

So, on account of the fact that a man like him could give his opponents the heebie-jeebies before the fight even started, I needed to always remember what he was capable of. I had to keep my wits about me and be on high alert at all times during our battle. If I didn’t, I’d lose in a heartbeat. Also, since we weren’t in my home territory, I couldn’t rely on my usual bag of dungeon tricks.

It doesn't matter. A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. I mean, I *had* promised En I'd show her how cool I really was. No choice but to plow ahead.

"I guess I'll be serious about this too since it doesn't look like you're gonna hold back. Let's do this, En."

"Okay...!"

Once I'd gotten her telepathic approval, I unsheathed En and tossed her scabbard into Inventory. Her scarlet blade glittered brightly, reflecting the sunlight.

"Oh ho, what do we have here?! Upsilon has finally deigned to brandish his sword in all its glory! Perhaps this is evidence of Lemiro's true strength as an adversary?!"

Shoving the emcee and crowd's voices from my mind, I focused solely on the opponent before me, exhaling a short breath.

"Ready or not, here I come, old man!"

As soon as I yelled that, I charged straight at the old butler, kicking off the ground with the force of an explosion. I was gonna strike the first blow in our fight.

Using the momentum I'd just generated, I swung En down using all my might. My slash rushed toward him with incredible speed, but not only did he evade it, he made evading it look easy. Because of that, En missed her mark and smashed into the arena floor, creating cracks and blasting debris into the air.

"Take that!"

Obscuring his vision even a little would be a godsend for me, so I kicked as many pieces of the floor into the butler's face as I could. Then, thinking I had the opening I wanted, I swung En at him again, sweeping her blade sideways. But his cool, relaxed expression never changed even a little bit. He skillfully chopped up the chunks of the arena while they were still in midair, rendering the makeshift projectiles useless, and dodged En's blade by nimbly jumping out of range.

"Hmph. Such terrifying attack speed indeed."

"I don't wanna hear that from someone who dodged like it was nothing!"

Snapping at him, I immediately brought several of my water dragons to life. I'd gotten so good at summoning them that there was no lag time between me activating my magic and them appearing anymore. And right out of the gate, I sicced them on the old butler at full throttle. If I took it easy on him, I had a feeling I'd lose.

"Graaawwwr!"

For some reason I still didn't know, the water dragons had learned how to roar a while back. They whirled and entwined with each other as they raced toward their target, practically swimming through the

air at light speed, their jaws open wide to swallow him whole.

“Hyah!”

The old man slashed right through them.

“Gah! Are you for real?!”

His sword whistled as he swung it down and split my dragons in half with a single stroke. Their magic-given forms destroyed, they turned into regular, harmless water before disappearing completely, leaving no traces behind.

Hey. Hey, wait, time out. Hold on just a goddamn minute here. Magic can be cut? That’s a thing you can do? This sure was news to me.

“Carelessness is one’s greatest enemy.”

“What the shit, dude?!”

Utterly shaken by the unexpected way my magic had been countered, I found myself slow to react as the old butler closed the gap between us in a flash and lunged at me. I scrambled to move En between us as a blockade, but his sword suddenly squirmed like a living thing and changed trajectory. *Huuuh?! Whoa, hang on! What the hell is that?!*

The moment I tried to defend myself with En, the butler’s single slash instantly doubled. There were now apparently *two* swords rushing toward me. Despite somehow managing to avoid most of his attack when I stumbled backward, he still managed to make shallow cuts on both of my arms, sending blood spraying out of the wounds.

“Wh-What the hell just happened?!”

It deadass looked like he grew two more arms and was holding another sword?! The most likely explanation was that he’d slashed at me twice, but with such terrifyingly high speed that it’d created the illusion of his arms multiplying. That was *probably* it...

“I’ll have you know it was nothing more than a cheap parlor trick. With a bit more diligent study on your part, I believe even you could master it.”

What was gramps here spouting? Did he actually think everybody was superhuman enough to pull off the same stunts he could? Compared to my early days in this world, I’d gotten much better at handling weapons. My Dexterity value had gone through the roof and I was even way more comfortable using magic. Thanks to these factors, my swordsmanship had gotten better too. Or so I’d thought. *I should’ve improved. I totally should have.*

Yet I couldn’t deny that I most definitely came out on the bottom against the hero, Carlotta the lady knight, and now this geezer. They couldn’t have been further out of my league in terms of skill with a blade if they tried—which, in hindsight, was pretty obvious. I mean, it’d barely been a year since I’d first picked up a weapon of any sort, just so you know.

Not to beat a dead horse either, but I'd said a whole bunch of times before that I truly didn't feel like I possessed any talent for swordsmanship. I wasn't blessed on that front. I'd just been skating by, pulling the wool over people's eyes with my various skills and stats. I mean, I wasn't upset about it or anything. It was just me being realistic about myself and my abilities, putting my current situation into perspective.

Okay, me, chill the heck out and think. First of all, I had no chance of victory in a sword fight. Despite being so much younger than him and therefore more agile, I was still getting my ass handed to me. I knew for a fact that my movements were faster than his, but that was doing me literally zero good. There was no waste whatsoever in the way the old guy moved. His skillful defensive movements reminded me of falling leaves and how impossible it was to predict the path they'd take as they fluttered to the ground.

Then, as usual, I just needed to find another way to win. Step one of doing that was to put some serious thought into what advantages I had over him. For starters, an incredibly tough body. Stamina. Magic. Wings to rise above. And finally, En.

Right, let's give it a go. Thinking clearly at long last, I busted out my wings before raising both my voice and En.

"En! Time to use your wind magic!"

"Okay...!"

I could feel her aggressive nod as she communicated telepathically, picking up on my intent right away. I held my greatsword behind me and powered up my magic to activate Crimson Flame, wrapping fire around her blade. As soon as En sensed the blaze enveloping her, she cloaked her blade with a jet of air blowing backward, creating an immediate explosion.

"Ngh!"

"Don't worry, old man! I'll put out the fire I started! With your body!"

Now that En had become a jet engine, I experienced a bunch of g's on my body as I blasted forward, covering the space between us in a heartbeat. Then, I whipped my sword around and launched it right at the old butler. He leaped back dramatically, realizing that even he couldn't take a direct hit like this. *Don't think I'll let you get away so easily.*

My body kicked backward from suddenly swinging En in front of me. Fortunately for me, though, I had excellent control of my wings, which I used to turn myself around and accelerate back to full speed. I flapped my wings in front of the old, sword-wielding butler, attacking him while abruptly changing my trajectory.

"Hrgh! You're a troublesome one, aren't you?!"

So saying, he skillfully deflected each of my slashes. His quick, sharp movements were the opposite of what you'd expect from someone his age. *Tch. Pot calling the kettle black, pal.*

"Your defensive movements are the *real* trouble here, my guy!"

I attacked him from all angles, circling him relentlessly from the air. I managed to graze him a few times with my flaming greatsword, gradually tearing his butler uniform to shreds, but I couldn't land a single solid hit. The lack of results was making me impatient, which caused my attacks to start getting reckless. That unfortunately gave him the opening he needed when I passed by too closely. He seized it without hesitation, stabbing me in the side of my torso.

Ugh, that hurts. Luckily, the wound wasn't too deep, but sweet bejeebus, what the hell kind of reflexes did this old fart actually have? On top of keeping up with my stupid-fast speed, he countered with insane precision. Even most of the monsters on my stat level in the Demonic Forest couldn't dodge En in her flame-cloaked state.

Apparently, as an individual aged, their stats diminished. So it scared me silly imagining how much more formidable this geezer would've been in his younger years. Factoring in what I'd learned about him so far, I bet he could've even given a dragon a run for its money.

The audience's cheers heated up as the fight progressed. A distant part of my brain logged the emcee's fervent play-by-play of the match, but I found it all kinds of annoying at the moment.

Haah... Calm down. I extinguished the vermilion flames surrounding En's blade and made her deactivate her wind magic. As for me? Well, I remained motionless up in the air, breathing in and out deeply, filtering the noise out of my head. I forced myself to concentrate only on the arena.

"Master! You're hurt!"

"Don't worry about me. Something like this is basically nothing. How's your magic looking, En?"

"I think...I can use it for one more minute."

Ah, crud. I made her use too much of it, huh? Potions didn't work on her, so I was in a real bind.

"Hmm... I understand now. Your weapon is an Intelligent Weapon, is it not? I didn't realize until now since it's my first encounter with one."

"Finally figured it out, eh?"

"Yes, because I perceived it obeying your will. You do indeed possess a magnificent sword. Please be sure to treat it well."

"Say less! My little girl is the strongest *and* the cutest in the whole world! Of course I'm gonna take damn good care of her!"

Zing! I pointed my finger at him aggressively, and for just a

moment, the old butler chuckled, the good-natured old man I'd first met resurfacing. En said nothing, but through our telepathic communication, I could feel her blushing and squirming in embarrassment. *What a cutie.*

"In any case, might you descend and meet me on equal ground?"

"Yeah, right! Like I'll willingly enter that danger zone!"

At the very least, his attacks wouldn't reach me up here. I hoped.

"I see. Then it seems I shall have to take the initiative instead."

Immediately, my Danger Detection ability warned me of something *real* bad coming my way.

"Bwah?!"

I sure as hell wasn't gonna ignore it, so I used my wings in midair to take urgent, immediate evasive action. A beat later, the old guy swung his sword with a powerful *whoosh*—and sent something like a flying slash at me. It missed my face by just a few centimeters before disappearing into the ether.

Wh-Whoa! What the hell was that?! If someone maxes Swordsmanship, they can attack from a distance too?! Based on the information my Demon Eyes picked up, it seemed he'd poured magic into his sword, which he'd fired off in a slash at us. This old man was just one surprise after another, like some sort of freaking human jack-in-the-box. It was insane. Go put yourself on exhibit at the World Expo or something. You'd be a big hit, jeez.

"Oho, so you were able to evade it?"

"That was dangerous, you son of a bitch!"

Wanting payback, I pushed my own magic into En, copying his style while making sure not to trigger her Crimson Flame ability. Then, visualizing an image of blasting the magical attack far, far away, I swung my greatsword hard at him. Doing so created a flying slash just like his. Except he avoided my attack, which meant the slash hit the arena floor, leaving behind a huge crater.

W-Wow... Not bad for my first try. I might be able to make this work.

"You only saw my attack once, yet you can already imitate it? Impressive indeed."

"Ha! I'm gonna wipe that relaxed look off your face, old man! Just you watch!"

Although I talked a big game, the fact was that I still hadn't managed to land a single solid hit on him yet. In which case, maybe it wasn't just the vast gulf in our combat difference that had me struggling. I suspected that his Mind's Eye and Acumen abilities also had a lot to do with his prowess. It honestly felt like he was predicting my every move.

Trying En's jet engine move again was an option, but it made me move so fast that it limited the offensive actions I could take. He'd see

through it easily enough to evade it. I scrapped the idea since it wouldn't serve as the decisive blow I needed to end our fight.

My next option was to use my enormous reserve of magic. If I launched a saturation attack and just barraged him with magical energy, it wouldn't matter if he knew what I was doing.

All right, old man, let me tell you what I can do in a fight. Bulldoze my opponents through sheer stats!

"Yo, gramps! No more breaks for you from now on!"

"Indeed? But I certainly wouldn't mind if you extended more sympathy for these old bones."

"Oh, put a sock in it!"

Hovering above the old dude, I worked up my magic and brought forth dozens of my water dragons, which coiled around me in the air.



“Go! That geezer doesn’t have long to live, so end his life here and now!”

Jeez, I sounded way too much like a stereotypical evil boss just now. That thought flashed through my mind even as I spat the words at him. But it didn’t matter. Taking my cue from a bullet hell-style game, I bombarded the old butler with scores of water dragons.

“Hmph, I see! Your strategy is strength in numbers!”

He chopped them into pieces as they attacked him one after another. It was almost like they kept bashing up against an invisible sword barrier. Not that it bothered me. I just kept on producing new water dragons to launch at the butler. All the while, I shouted “Ora! Ora, ora, ora, ora!” like a certain man who went on bizarre adventures.

Even so, I didn’t actually think that a simple, one-note bulldozing technique like this would take down the coot who was almost weirdly strong. *No, the real plot’s gonna unfold right...now.* Gramps continued wielding his sword with inhuman speed, massacring every water dragon that charged him. But I added a new addition to my army of water dragons on the field in the form of a single, massive earth dragon like the one I’d used to defeat the bandits.

“Graaawwwr!”

The old butler slashed at the earth dragon, but unfortunately for him, his new opponent was built different. I’d used a special type of magic to create the earth dragon; one different from the usual stuff I used for the water dragons. As a result, despite being cut in half, it just reconnected itself and continued its assault.

As soon as my opponent realized that he couldn’t beat my earth dragon, he started taking evasive actions instead of counterattacking. He moved in such a way that he was using the earth dragon, which was hot on his heels, as his own personal shield against the attacking water dragons. He kept up this trajectory of movement, escaping all of my dragons.

Hats off to you, ya codger! But I’m nowhere near done!

The butler rolled and jumped every which way to avoid the earth and water dragons as they charged him in waves. But the next time he stepped on the ground, it exploded from underneath him.

“Ngh!”

He definitely hadn’t anticipated that particular attack because he didn’t manage to dodge in time. A burst of flames swallowed him up and he disappeared temporarily as clouds of smoke engulfed him. Using elemental magic, this was a trap I’d developed and refined after my battle with the dickweed dragon. It activated when someone or something stepped on the designated area, which in turn triggered a

pseudo-explosion caused by magical energy and blew up the ground around it. In other words, it was a magical land mine.

This trap was super compatible with my Traps ability too, which increased the power and hiddenness of any traps I installed as I leveled it up. I'd stealthily set up a few of them on the stage while the old butler had been busy dealing with the countless water and earth dragons.

Any normal opponent would've had their lower body torn to pieces by now, but sadly for me, the dinosaur of a servant wasn't normal. All the extraordinary enemies I'd faced in my new life thus far absolutely refused to be defeated by ordinary methods, and he was no exception.

Here's my chance to finish this once and for all. The moment he got caught up in the destructive blast, I ordered my dragons to charge right into the clouds of smoke. Flapping my wings, I rushed into the fray with them—when Danger Detection went off!

I immediately rotated in midair and fled. A second later, a laser beam of sorts pierced through the spot I'd just been in with a sharp whistling noise. When my eyes focused there, I saw a sword. The old man was still wielding his sword, paying no attention to the soot covering his body or the tattered rags that used to be his uniform. He hadn't missed the moment I'd gotten within range of his blade and had used it to jump up and attack me. *Christ, what a scary old man!*

Having successfully avoided his lunge in the nick of time, I quickly recovered my stance and swung En at him. But he defended himself smoothly, fending off my assault before allowing himself to drop toward the ground.

"I won't let you get away so easily!"

Using my wings, I rushed toward the falling butler and whirled En down from directly above him. He used his sword to protect himself against the attack, then countered with a graceful, flowing slash of his own. His blade sliced into my torso, but the cut was shallow since he couldn't put his weight behind it. Ignoring the minimal damage, I kicked him with all my might. He could neither defend nor evade, so my foot caught him hard in his trunk.

Our little battle took place in the space of a single moment. After it was done, we landed on the ground. The impact rocked through my whole body and shock waves rolled across the floor.

"Hrk—"

My foot was lodged into his torso when we crashed onto the arena floor. Driven hard into the ground by the combined force of our fall and the full weight of my body, the old butler coughed up blood. But even in that condition, he swung his sword in a counterattack.

Since I had a good handle on his personality by now, I'd

anticipated this old-timer doing something like that. Still pinning him down with a foot, I used my free leg to kick away the hand holding the sword. Then, I plunged En's blade into the ground right next to his neck.

"I win."

"Heh heh. That means I've lost, eh? Even though I had every intention of emerging victorious."

Blood trickling from the corner of his mouth, the old man grinned mischievously up at me as he spoke.

"And we have a winner! It's Upsiloon!"

At the emcee's declaration, the crowd, having gone silent at some point during the fight, exploded into roaring cheers. I huffed out a breath, took my foot off the old dude's chest, and hefted En onto my shoulder.

"Old man, you need to see a doctor ASAP. Maybe next time you'll take your age into account and not overdo it, yeah?"

"Indeed. I shall do as you say and get myself treated at once."

Acting like nothing of note had happened, he stood up and ever so casually brushed the dust off his clothes. But considering that more than half of his HP was gone, I had a hard time buying the nonchalant act.

"Ya know, I sure am glad you're a geezer."

He bowed courteously to me before leaning heavily on the relief squad members who'd rushed into the arena. They'd been waiting in the wings for the end of our fight. I smiled ruefully as I watched him walk away, his undaunted aura firmly in place despite everything.

As far as the results went, I'd managed to secure victory without incurring any significant damage to myself. That said, if I'd fought the old man when he was in his prime, I was almost positive I wouldn't have won. Based on his skillful swordplay and defensive body movements, he was powerful enough to be classed as one of the top contenders in this tournament. I couldn't say that for sure since I hadn't seen every single contestant fight, of course, but I was pretty positive about it.

I found myself recalling my thoughts on humans during the preliminaries. It was clear that they really did have all kinds of techniques to make up for their inherent lack of physical strength. I had no doubt they would refine them even more as the years went by, each generation passing on even more sophisticated versions to the one that came after.

Naturally, demons and demi-humans probably had their own legendary techniques to hand down, but these folks had much longer life spans than humans, which meant their techniques would be passed down without changing for longer. In short, their development

was slower than humans’.

Huh. I thought about this in connection to the few bits of history I’d learned. Evidently, humans had been considered insignificant in wars between the various races. But now, I’d gotten a glimpse into one reason they’d turned the tables on everyone and currently held the advantage.

And this fight made me *very* well aware that ultimately, a person’s stats were just one factor in a battle. Relying on them too much could easily lead to the rug being pulled out from under you, just like what’d happened to me when I’d fought the damned dragon.

“Thanks for schooling me, old man.”

Muttering quietly to myself, I exited the arena, the audience still cheering in the background.

“Ahhh... I’m whooped. That was one scary geezer, huh?” I said to En telepathically.

“Yes... He was a really strong grandpa. Lots of energy too.”

“You can say that again.”

Dude’s gonna live forever. I know it.

“More importantly...how are your wounds, Master?”

“They’re not a big deal, so I’ll treat them with a potion later. But thanks for worrying about me, kiddo.”

“Mm-hmm...”

Taking the hallway behind the arena, I was halfway to my private waiting room when I heard the sound of rapid footsteps echoing down the path. I turned my head toward the source.

“Oh. It’s you, Haloria. What’s up?”

Haloria was practically running toward me. She should’ve been with Leila, though, hence I cocked my head inquiringly as I questioned her. She glanced to either side to make sure we were alone before, for extra safety, whispering her answer.

“I come bearing an urgent message from Lady Leila. ‘The Communication Orb is flaring red.’”

The heck...?

Side Story 2: A Certain Young Lady under the King's Command

Late at night, in front of a hidden building practically swallowed up by those adjacent to it.

“Up ahead. Two in front of the door and two on the roof.”

Lurking there were three shadows. One had essentially assimilated completely into the darkness. Another had suppressed its presence to the extreme, fading almost totally into the background. The third, standing behind the other two, seemed slightly flustered.

“I’ll manage the ones on the roof, then. The two down below to you are yours. Are we all in agreement?”

“Understood, sir. Vishay, that makes you the lookout. Be on your guard for anything in the vicinity, okay?”

“R-Roger.”

“Listen to me, Vishay. Take a deep breath and calm down. You’ll be fine. Remember all the training you’ve done. On the off chance things go wrong, you’ll still be fine. I’m right here and so is the captain, so stop being so damn nervous already.”

“Urk! Y-You don’t have to be so mean about it!”

The third shadow, a young lady named Vishay, protested in a whisper.

“Ah ha ha! Now, now, no need to rile yourself up. It’s vital to keep a cool head.”

In the very next instant, just when she thought she saw the darkness in front of her warp for a split second, the two individuals on the roof suddenly collapsed, motionless. Standing behind them was the silhouette of a person who had moved silently and in the blink of an eye.

Then, in tandem with the attack on the rooftop personnel, the other shadow in front of Vishay made his move. Movements keen and nimble, he rushed toward the guards stationed outside the door and commenced his attack.

“Geh—”

“Wh-Wha—”

The first had their throat slit. The second, their heart pierced. Unable to so much as attempt to counter, the two began to slump. Before their lifeless bodies hit the ground, however, the shadowed figure caught them and carefully lowered them down. He didn’t want

their falling corpses to make any noise.

“W-Wow... You’re both incredible...”

“Vishay, please give me your analysis of the enemies inside.”

Her comrade leaped lightly from the roof and landed soundlessly next to her, posing that question to her.

“U-Understood. Please wait a moment.”

So saying, she closed her eyes. Then, she snapped them open, staring fixedly at the wall of the building in front of them.

“Inside, there are...sixteen people. They haven’t yet noticed our presence, but they are all on high alert.”

“Mm. No surprise there since we’ve been on the offensive lately. What about their positions?”

“Right past the entrance, there are three in the section that looks like a guard house. Four in the room straight past it. On the second floor, one in the front room and another in the back. The first room on the basement level has four individuals, and three are in a room deeper in.”

“There’s quite a lot of them. What’s our next move, Captain?”

“I don’t see an issue given that they’re scattered throughout. I’ll take the lead and storm in, so kindly guard Vishay in the meantime, won’t you?”

“Sure, I don’t mind. But... You’re certain you’ll be fine on your own, Captain?”

“Well, this is my job, after all. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I shan’t be long.”

With those words, he once more melted into the darkness and vanished from the spot.

“Oh my. The captain’s magic never ceases to astound me.”

“Agreed. He’s powerful enough to be called the king’s right hand. Make an enemy of him and your life will be forfeit before you even know it. From the fiends’ perspective, he’s the personification of their nightmares, huh?” the man assigned to guard duty commented, smiling wryly.

“I... All I can think is that I’m glad to be an ally instead.”

“I feel the same way.”

A few minutes lapsed as they silently stood in front of the building, ever vigilant of their surroundings. Then, the door opened with a creak. Moving silently, Vishay’s escort immediately drew his knife and took up a fighting stance. But just as quickly, he lowered his weapon upon recognizing their captain exiting the structure.

“I see you made quick work of them, Captain.”

“E-Excellent work, Captain.”

“Yes, and thank you. Now that we’ve accomplished what we set out to do, I believe it’s well past time for us to withdraw.”

“Oh, um, what about the bod—”

Before Vishay could finish speaking, the man they referred to as “Captain” placed his hand on one of the corpses, which was still profusely gushing blood. At his touch, it disappeared from the spot, fusing into the darkness just like the captain had done a short while earlier.

“Hmm? Is something amiss, Vishay?”

“Um...no. No, not at all.”

“If you say so. Let’s return, then, shall we?”



“Heh heh.”

“Oh? You seem to be in a fine mood, Vishay.”

The young lady who happened to be one of Vishay’s coworkers, Haloria, spoke. Sprawled out on her bed and wearing an expression that conveyed her exhaustion, she craned only her neck in Vishay’s direction.

“Hee hee hee. Am I that obvious?”

“To me, you are. Considering how long we’ve known each other, I should at the very least be able to discern your moods by now. So, tell me what happened.”

“Okay! Take a look at this!”

Vishay showed her colleague the parchment she was holding.

“...What is it?”

“You know the king’s ally, the masked individual? He gave me his autograph!”

Vishay worked as one of the Demon King’s eyes and ears on the ground, specializing in dark deeds. Overall, her stats weren’t very high and she didn’t possess any particularly noteworthy abilities, save for one that set her apart from the vast majority of people: the special ability Clairvoyance.

When she activated this ability, everything—literally everything—was stripped bare. Regardless of physical obstructions like walls and distance, if she wanted to see something hidden, she could. The ability revealed all to her, including a person’s magic and strength. Understanding the value of her ability, the Demon King had put her through a long, rigorous training regimen. Her efforts had finally borne fruit when she’d been assigned her first mission, which involved participating in a surprise attack on the enemy’s stronghold.

Her ability possessed another important facet as well. Infusing an enormous amount of her magical energy into it gave her a serious advantage when it came to searching for enemies who had disguised themselves in a crowd. Due to this, she had been slipped in as part of the venue personnel at the tournament currently taking place in the

demon world's capital. She could easily spot any hostile individuals in the audience at the coliseum.

And so, her involvement in the tournament had led to her being unwittingly captivated by the masked man who was the king's collaborator. The king himself had chosen this man as an ally, which meant he undoubtedly harbored a tremendous amount of power. His fights were quite flashy, as evidenced by his various actions such as deliberately taking the brunt of his opponents' attacks before returning them several times over, stomping on his adversaries' faces, and agitating the audience itself. It was plain that he purposely played the heel in all his matches.

She found his fighting style beautifully glorious, in a way. Before she knew it, she had become so wildly fanatical about him that she had unthinkingly begged for his autograph when she'd had the opportunity to act as his guide for a match. This act was even more astounding given her relatively timid personality.

"Oh? Did he, now? I'm happy for you."

"Thank you! Haloria, you've been assigned as his attendant, right? What kind of person is he?"

"Um, the king's ally is... Hmm... Well, I struggle to find the right words to describe him, but I'd say 'reckless' fits him best."

"R-Reckless?"

Vishay repeated the word, looking puzzled. Still lying on her bed, Haloria shrugged and gave her reply.

"Yes. Virtually everything he does is unconventional, betraying any and all expectations one might have of him. But an individual who would capture people's attention one way or another was exactly the sort of talent the king wanted to recruit, so I suppose he has his uses."

"Ha ha..."

Not knowing how to react, all Vishay could do was laugh awkwardly at her tired friend's comment. She acknowledged the truth in those words, though, as his personality demonstrated itself strongly in every match. In her opinion, he most likely conducted himself the way he did because it was his goal to attract people's interest, but even so, she couldn't deny the fact that he was certainly a great deal more eccentric than most.

"I do have a confession. There's something quite peculiar about being in his direct vicinity. I feel a sense of safety—of comfort, if you will—whenever I'm near him. Although nothing he does actually gives me peace of mind."

"Oh, I understand what you mean! I think it could be because of his magical energy. He's enveloped in that particular aura of magic, you see."

Through the use of her Clairvoyance ability, Vishay's perception of his magical power hadn't been all that scary, which had initially surprised her considering his rather flamboyant fighting style. Rather, it emanated an incredible warmth that seemed to entice her into wanting to watch him and feel his energy even more. This insight into the masked man's true nature, as shown to her by her special ability, was essentially the reason she had been able to request his autograph without fear.

"Fascinating... If you say so, then it must be true, Vishay. In any case, don't you have to be up early for work tomorrow? Oh, right, I do as well. We should both get our rest whenever we can so we don't risk collapsing from exhaustion. Especially when we're already overworked."

"You're absolutely right, Haloria. Good night, then."

"Good night, Vishay."

With that, Vishay snuffed out the room's candle.

Chapter 3: The Hero

A room with a wooden floor, reminiscent of a dojo somewhere. It was so spacious that a few dozen people could fit inside and it still wouldn't feel cramped.

"We are aware that your group currently remains neutral. We do not ask allyship of you; instead, we request that you continue to maintain your neutrality as you have done so far."

Sitting in the center of the room were Nell the hero and Ronia the royal conjurer. They had dispelled their disguises, leaving themselves in their true, human forms. Surrounding them along the walls of the room sat a group of people with wings extending from their backs and bird-of-prey-like heads that sported beaks and piercing eyes.

"Well, now isn't this interesting? A puny race like humans dares to command *us*?"

One of the men from this group, a subgroup of demonkind known as the winged, spoke. He was roughly twice the size of the girls and sat facing them, glaring hard while infusing menace into his voice. Yet the undaunted Nell didn't so much as flinch as she responded to him.

"I've heard that demons as a species are the sort to follow the strong."

"You heard right. Give those stronger than you the respect they're due. So long as they have an attitude befitting the strong, of course."

"Then I kindly request your fealty, even temporarily, because I'm stronger than all of you."

Nell made that declaration matter-of-factly.

"You mock us, little girl!"

One of the young men sitting against a wall shot to his feet, his aggressive shout clearly conveying that he had reached his limit upon hearing her last remark. He brandished his naginata and pointed it at her. Following his lead, several more of the winged also drew their weapons, readying themselves for battle. Seeing this, Ronia stood up as well, raised her staff high, and activated her magic so that she could use it were there a need for her spellcasting at any point.

The situation had turned critical. So much tension blanketed the room that it could explode from just a single wrong move, completely breaking down the discussion. But Nell was unperturbed. She gazed unwaveringly at the man sitting in front of her—the head of the winged. Not a hint of nerves showed in her composed expression.

“You have guts, I’ll give you that. You really think you can win against every one of us here?”

“I will admit that I won’t walk out unharmed should we engage in combat. Perhaps I might lose an arm or a leg. In the end, though, I’ll be the only one standing.”

“Again with your insolence!”

Nell didn’t even glance at the angry young man. She just kept talking.

“But I don’t think we need to come to blows right now because I’m confident you’ll agree to my proposal.”

The patriarch of the winged twitched slightly in response to Nell’s words.

“Are you, now? Explain.”

“As a race, the winged hold duels in high esteem, yes? So if I were to challenge you to one, the others would have no choice but to stay out of it.”

“Hmph. You’re correct. In that event, they wouldn’t be able to interfere. The only thing they could do is watch on silently as the duel unfolds.”

“Should this duel take place and I somehow lose, I still plan to inflict so much damage to you that you’ll be forced to wander the boundary between life and death. I warrant that alone will suffice to prove the extent of my strength.”

The head of the winged said nothing. His sharp stare bored into the girl sitting across from him, almost as if he was trying to get a grasp on her.

“If the patriarch of the winged loses or suffers a fatal wound, your people will essentially fall into a state of chaos. I have no doubt about that. With the world at large as unstable as it is right now, do you truly wish to risk fighting a life-or-death battle, one in which you can’t be certain of your victory, against me? Compared to that, I’d say agreeing to my proposal of maintaining your neutral stance should be infinitely more preferable.”

After Nell said her piece, the winged’s patriarch closed his eyes and ruminated in silence for some time. Both stillness and tension permeated the room. Motionless, Nell continued staring fixedly at the man in front of her. Then, he finally, slowly opened his eyes and a sudden grin lit up his face.

“Kah ha ha... Very well. I acknowledge your pluck, missy. For now, we winged will regard you as our compatriots while maintaining our stance of neutrality—not that I ever had any intention of compromising it. But make no mistake, the *only* ones we consider our compatriots are you two and the comrade you’ve brought with you today.”

“That’s fine. I accept your terms and thank you sincerely.”

Nell breathed a sigh of relief when she heard the patriarch’s words. She allowed a small smile to surface on her face.

“M-My liege?! Have you lost your mind?!”

The young man who had pointed his weapon at Nell and Ronia raised his voice, his expression disbelieving. Yet the head of the winged glared at him, shouting angrily.

“Silence! I’ve made my decision. Any further complaints, whelp?”

“Ngh... No, my liege, none.”

Subdued by his leader’s ire, the young man bowed his head and kept quiet.

“The rest of you listen as well! You’re forbidden from laying a finger on either of these individuals. Henceforth, we look upon them as our brethren! I trust there are no objections?!”

“No, my liege!”

Everyone in attendance bowed their heads and spoke in unison, confirming their obedience to his order. The patriarch nodded, satisfied by their actions.

“You two. Do you plan to secure lodgings in the area?”

“Yes, we do.”

“Then I’ll loan you the use of one of our inns. We’ll be hosting a feast tonight, so rest until then.”

“You do us a great service. Thank you very much, patriarch.”

Nell lowered her head respectfully as she spoke.

“Bah, don’t fuss with such trivialities. I’m only acting the way I would toward someone whose strength I recognize. Escorts! One of you shall guide these two and their comrade waiting in the next room to one of our inns outside.”

With that, Nell and Ronia allowed themselves to be led out of the room by one of the attendants stationed by the entrance. Nell was aware of a few angry stares tracking their movements as they exited, but her unfamiliarity with others’ malice meant she only thought of their frustration as something that could be allayed with time and persuasion. She paid little heed to the ill will directed at them.

“Ahhh... I’m sooo tired. You don’t know how nervous I was back there.”

Nell flopped down on one of the beds in the room provided to them and exhaled deeply.

“Well done, Nell, Ronia. Is it safe to assume the discussion went well then?”

A girl named Mekina addressed Nell and Ronia. She was part of the team that had accompanied the two girls to the territory ruled over by the winged. Unlike Nell and Ronia, who were born and raised

in the Kingdom of Alisia, Mekina hailed from the Allied Federation of Germania, a friendly neighboring nation—albeit “nation” was a bit of a misnomer because, as its name indicated, the Federation was comprised of several self-governing municipalities.

The group deployed to the demon world on this occasion was composed of a variety of individuals. Though citizens of Alisia, the largest kingdom in the realm, made up its core, there were others like Mekina who were subjects of friendly neighboring countries. Their group also included a few who didn’t belong to any one nation but nevertheless chose to cooperate because they were determined to avoid wars. Despite their varied backgrounds, everyone in the unit had one thing in common: they were considered extraordinarily powerful in the human world.

Calling them “powerful” didn’t necessarily refer to their physical strength, however. Some, for example, specialized in espionage or otherwise gathering uncommon bits of information. Essentially, each had cultivated a mastery of their respective fields and skill sets. In other words, it was a coalition of experts—a motley yet talented crew.

“Nell did a great job of getting right to the point.”

“Good, I’m glad to hear that. Now we don’t have to worry about the winged interfering with our work here.”

The reason for their current trip to the winged’s territory had to do with the fiends, the group of demons deemed enemies. Eager to recruit allies to their faction from all over the world, the fiends had included the winged in their campaign, as the winged held a certain amount of power within demonkind. Yet for reasons they refused to disclose, they had long remained neutral in the discord between the two factions.

If the feuding sides’ precarious equilibrium collapsed, the most likely outcome was the eruption of war. Were that to happen, it was all too easy to imagine the shock waves spreading as far as the human world. A war on that scale came with the very real possibility of bloodshed rising beyond what the peoples of this world, regardless of race or species, had experienced before.

The recent, extensively proclaimed Four Races Alliance Summit had demonstrated to the demon world at large that the Demon King’s faction had succeeded in gaining allies from a variety of races. In short, their alliance meant they had the numbers to send to any front line, whether a minor skirmish or, in the most extreme case, a world war.

To prevent such a calamitous situation from occurring, it was vital to not only increase the number of neutral groups in the demon world but also reduce the scale of conflict between the two warring factions. It went without saying that the first tactic might not ultimately lead to

any significant change in the circumstances, but shortening the enemy's list of allies as well as lengthening one's own, even by a small margin, was the most basic of basics when it came to strategy. If they succeeded, they might even be able to lessen the long-running tensions bogging down demons and humans. Resolute in their shared, powerful will to crush this potential spark of war for the sake of the human world, the three young women worked hard to fulfill their goal.

"Still, I certainly won't be quitting my day job. Based on what I knew of demons' tendency to esteem the strong, I made sure to appear firm and confident, I'm just really bad at acting like that."

Nell spoke to her friends while rolling around on top of her bed. Ronia chuckled in response.

"Yes, you've always been terrible at instigating your opponents. I'm just glad the winged's leader turned out to be a rational man."

"Urk, you're right. I honestly do think I probably could have won against them in a fight, but it would have been much too close. I'm glad I avoided that."

"Oh my, so the patriarch truly did seem quite powerful to you?" Mekina asked Nell, listening to the other two's conversation.

"He did. I barely have him beat in the way of stats. I'm almost positive Mr. Lemiro could win against him pretty easily, though."

"Oh, yes, that older gentleman. Of course, he quit working as an adventurer a long time ago, but he was one of the greatest Orichalcum-class adventurers of all time. If he can't defeat the winged's patriarch, then in all likelihood, no human can." Mekina sighed softly. "I so dearly wish to be more useful in combat..."

"No use lamenting it. I'm a burden in combat too. That's just how great the disparity in power between demons and humans is."

Ronia replied matter-of-factly to Mekina. Heroes and other outliers notwithstanding, she, too, excelled at magical techniques and knowledge in her own right. She had no equal in the human world when it came to her particular talents. Yet even with her prodigious skills, she could not compete with demons' overwhelming magical power and prowess.

Perhaps that was a bit of a broad generalization considering the variety of races encompassing demonkind. Taking this into account, Ronia could still be described as an outstanding conjurer, though she could never hope to best an entire species known for having an aptitude for magic itself. Therefore, someone like her was much better suited to supporting combatants on the front line rather than being in the direct line of fire. It wasn't as if a great many expectations had been placed on her physical strength in the first place.

"Don't trouble yourselves on that front. You two do what I'm

unable to, and you do it well. I myself still have a very long way to go too, but I can promise you this: I'll protect everyone if it's the last thing I do!"

Nell squeezed both hands into fists, displaying her determination.

"Tee hee. I'm counting on you, then, Nell."

"I agree. In exchange, we'll handle anything you can't—including waking you up on those mornings you oversleep."

"Y-You don't actually have to say that out loud, you know!"

Ronia and Mekina burst out laughing at the hero who puffed her cheeks out angrily.



"Shite!"

Chiing. The high-pitched sound of blades clashing. A few seconds later, a *clang clang* as something clattered to the ground.

"Ngh... I lose."

His naginata blasted from his hands, the winged man conceded when he found a sword pressed against his throat. Simultaneously, a commotion stirred.

"Thank you very much for the contest."

Nell pulled back her practice sword with a broad smile.

"I expected nothing less of you. You defeated our elite so easily."

Thus spoke the patriarch. He had watched their fight from just outside the combat ring, where he sat cross-legged like the other spectators.

"My deepest apologies for losing, my liege."

The winged man faced his leader and bent down onto one knee, his head hanging low in frustration.

"It's fine. Though this young maiden is human, she's a powerful individual. I trust this has been a good learning experience for you."

"Yes, it has. I feel as if I've caught a glimpse of how vast the world really is," the man said earnestly.

Earlier in the evening, upon being informed that the preparations for the banquet were complete, the hero and her comrades had been escorted to the plaza of the winged's town. They'd discovered upon arriving that a combat ring was situated right in its center for some inexplicable reason.

Somewhat suspicious, they'd nevertheless sat down where they were told to. The feast commenced soon after, and halfway through, when the patriarch had led everyone's merrymaking to a fever pitch, he'd demanded that Nell "demonstrate her caliber to all in attendance." She hadn't been all that surprised by this; in fact, she had been expecting something like it. *If that's all it takes to dispel their concerns, then...* Nell had agreed to his request, which involved her

facing off against the winged's elite.

As of now, she had fought and won three matches, showing off her strongest abilities as a hero and holding nothing back. It had made the feast all the livelier. However, in terms of stamina and sheer power, Nell was subpar compared to demons. So how exactly was she able to overpower her opponents? Especially when the winged themselves were acknowledged as one of the superior races by demonkind itself? The answer was her magnificent swordsmanship.

Swordsmanship had been drilled into the inherently dexterous Nell as a core skill for a hero to possess. She had taken to the art like a duck to water, learning easily and rapidly right from her very first lesson. Because of her outstanding gift for the ability, her swordsmanship was of a much higher caliber than the average swordsman's.

On top of that, for these past several weeks of their mission, she and her friends had been under the tutelage of the elderly gentleman in the steward's uniform that was their comrade and companion. He'd taught them what he called "the heart and soul of the sword." As a result, her finesse with her blade had grown by leaps and bounds compared to just a short while prior.

Affinity with various combat arts was also an issue. The demons' martial arts tended to heavily favor their head-on, brute-force fighting style, whereas the humans' martial arts developed from an emphasis on technique to make up for their fundamental physical weakness. She found her talents a much better fit for the latter.

Despite Nell still having plenty of room for growth, her abilities already far surpassed those of most humans. She had improved herself so much that she could defeat demons, naturally possessed of tremendous physical prowess, without straining for air.

"Nell, daughter of humans. You have given us a great show tonight. It should have been enough to convince any remaining skeptics to think of you as one of our brethren now too."

"I found this to be a wonderful opportunity for me as well, so I'm grateful to you, patriarch. As you said, I do hope this dispels any lingering doubts your people may have."

"Bah. If there are still any who refuse to accept your talent, I'll personally enlighten them. More importantly, let us enjoy the banquet. Eat and enjoy to your heart's content."

"I will, thank you very much. Allow me to dig in right away!"

The head of the winged cackled in delight, and Nell responded with a laugh of her own as she thanked him. After that, several of the winged folk approached her, wanting to learn the secret of her strength with which she had beaten three of their elite into submission. She whiled away the rest of the night in that manner,

conversing with both her comrades and her new friends.

Late at night. In a pitch-black room completely devoid of moonlight, the sound of several people breathing softly as they slept could be heard. The guests remained deep in the throes of dreamland as the door to the room opened with a muted creak. A number of individuals, clad head to toe in black, entered, slipping inside soundlessly as if they were sliding through the darkness itself. Each held a dagger dripping with liquid of a most unpleasant color. Several of these black-clad people surrounded each bed, stationing themselves by the pillows. They raised the daggers high overhead.

“That’s an illusion.”

“Ngh?!”

At the sudden, unexpected voice, they whirled around and found a young lady who should have been asleep in one of the beds. She stood by one of the walls, an area that should have been empty, with her staff already held aloft.

Unable to comprehend the situation fully, the black-clad nevertheless sighted one of their targets and immediately moved to attack. They were too late, however.

“Sleep of Repose.”

As she spoke, the black-clad lost consciousness, their bodies dropping to the floor with heavy thuds.

“It’s done.”

“Thanks, Ronia. You saved our necks.”

“You most certainly did, Ronia. Thank you so much.”

While Nell and Mekina spoke, the magic protecting them dissolved. They gradually appeared once more, their forms seemingly seeping out of the darkness itself. Facing her friends, Ronia shook her head, the motion indicating that their appreciation was misappropriated.

“No, you noticed them first, Mekina. That was the only reason I was able to use the vanishing magic on us.”

“You’re right. Thank you as well, Mekina. I was sleeping so hard, I was dead to the world. I never even noticed them.”

“Well, I have to make sure I do my job right when the occasion calls for it, hm? I wouldn’t want to risk my older sister being dismissed from her post as a result of my incompetence.”

A small, rueful smile appeared on Mekina’s face.

Mekina was an intelligence operative. Her primary responsibility involved gathering information. When she was with others, she used her extraordinary perceptive abilities to scout for enemies in their surroundings while maintaining a general state of alertness. There was a good reason she hadn’t been with Nell and Ronia during their initial

meeting with the winged's patriarch. Using "I'd rather not make a nuisance of myself by adding to our contingent" as a pretext, she had waited in the parlor instead. She'd been left entirely alone there, so she'd taken advantage of the opportunity to investigate the winged as much as possible.

Because this sort of stealth work was her life's calling, she was extremely sensitive to the presence of others. She could detect them even when she was sleeping, for example, which was exactly what had happened in this instance. Sensing hostile individuals approaching the room they had been provided, she had warned the others in time for Ronia to cast her magic on them. Then, they'd lain in wait for the enemy.

"I'd just like to point out, Nell, that you normally would have noticed quickly too. Perhaps not as fast as Mekina, but definitely faster than me. I know you didn't drink yourself into a stupor, but you still drank too much liquor at the feast. I hope you learned your lesson."

"Urk. I-I couldn't help myself... It was just so tasty..."

The stench of alcohol still subtly cloaked Nell's body. She scratched her cheek in embarrassment as she spoke to her friends. Ronia huffed out a breath, shaking her head in exasperation, and Mekina laughed watching them both.

"I-In any case, who even are these people? Where did they come from?"

Nell rushed to change the subject and dropped her gaze to the black-clad individuals. They appeared dead, though they only slept deeply as a result of the spell Ronia had cast.

"Are they winged?"

"No, I don't believe so," Mekina replied to Ronia while nudging one of the intruders with her foot, turning them face up. "No bird head."

"And we're not well versed enough in demon species knowledge to determine the race either. Honestly, why must there be so many demon races?"

"Maybe we should ask the patriarch—"

The moment Nell, the closest of the girls to the room's window, began to speak, the sound of a tumult faintly reached her ears.

"What the...?"

Puzzled, she opened the window of their second-floor room and glanced out—where she found a battle unfolding. Everywhere, members of the winged clan were fighting the black-clad intruders to the death. Now that the window was open, a cacophony of screams, roars, and clashing blades burst through distinctly.

"Oh no!"

I dropped my guard because the discussion went so well. Under normal circumstances, she would have noticed the abnormal change in the atmosphere much sooner. She loathed the naivete she'd shown, and remorse twisted her expression for a second. But she had no time for regret, as she immediately spotted a winged man and a black-clad figure slashing at each other not far below, as well as another of the black-clad creeping up behind the winged man, who was unaware of the enemy sneaking up on him.

"No!"

Nell hesitated for only an instant as she calculated the distance from their second-floor room to the ground. Just as quickly, she tightened her lips, placed one foot on the window ledge, and leaped outside in a single rush.

"Nell!" Ronia shouted, shock exuding from every pore of her body.

After floating in the air for a few moments, Nell bent her knees to lessen the impact of her landing. Then, she used her crouched position to kick off from the ground as hard as she could, racing over to the combatants she had spied in just a few steps.

"Hyah!"

The blade of Nell's sword glinted as, utilizing the momentum of her dash, she swung it at her foe. Seeing her charge, the black-clad individual who had intended to cut down the winged man from behind immediately retreated. They evaded her attack, but she had already prepared herself for her second assault. She whirled around nimbly and assailed her opponent with another slash. Unable to dodge it, the black-clad person found their torso deeply sliced through.

"Gwah—"

"Tch!"

Seeing their comrade felled, the other black-clad figure ascertained that the situation had turned disadvantageous. After leaping back to dodge the winged man's attack and putting a great deal of distance between them, they escaped, melting into the darkness.

"You saved my life! Many thanks!"

"No trouble at all! More importantly, who are all those people?!"

The winged man shook his head in response to Nell's question. He was fitted with lustrous black armor and carried a naginata, both of which were unique to his people.

"I have no idea! They appeared out of nowhere and started attacking immediately! Forgive me, but I have to go to the patriarch! Perhaps I shouldn't worry about you because I know you're capable, but please, get somewhere safe!"

With those words, he flapped his wings and flew toward the heart

of the town.

“Nell!”

The hero whipped around when she heard her name. Ronia and Mekina were running toward her. Seeing their grave faces, she realized that the situation was much worse than she had initially thought. Clearly, the three of them hadn’t been the only ones attacked.

“I’m so sorry. I got careless after no longer being able to sense the enemy’s presence near the inn. I should have realized much sooner.”

“It’s not your fault. But what happened to the people who attacked us?”

“We stripped them bare and tied them up. What should we do, Nell?”

After calming Mekina down, Nell now had to contend with Ronia’s question. She closed her eyes tightly, mulling it over. They needed to determine their next course of action right away. *Flee? Or fight?*

“...We’ll go to where the patriarch and his people are. There must be something we can help them with.”

If Mr. Yuki were here, he would never abandon anyone. An image of the always-grinning demon lord who easily crushed every enemy he faced flashed through her mind. Even *he* aided those in need whenever he happened upon them, so if she, an actual, literal hero, fled from danger right now, she would surely become a laughingstock. The irony of the many actions of a demon lord being carved into a hero so strongly that they had essentially become her own moral code was not lost on her.

“I agree. I’d like to gather more information as well. At the very least, we need to determine the identities of the people who are currently attacking the winged.”

“Then...should we use the Comm Orb?”

Nell shook her head in response to Ronia’s question.

“No. We still don’t know what’s going on. As Mekina suggested, we have to find out who the enemy is first. We’ll use the Comm Orb afterward.”

“Got it.”

And so, the curtain rose on an incredibly long day for the trio.



Far from abating, the clamor instead continued to grow. The winged’s settlement was quite large—closer to a town or small city than a village—and throughout its streets, the horrors of battle began to rise ever so clearly. The hero and her companions had already encountered the unidentified group of invaders several times by this

point. Working in tandem with members of the winged, they had so far succeeded in repelling the enemy.

"It's quite evident that their assault is of a military nature, hmm?" Mekina murmured, her expression grim.

"Specifically, it was a surprise attack against the winged. I think we were just unlucky and got caught up in it."

Usually not one to let her emotions show on her face, Ronia, too, looked stony-eyed as she surveyed their surroundings, constantly on guard.

"In any case, we have to hurry. That's the only thing we can do right now."

After this exchange, they continued pressing forward. A few minutes later, they finally arrived in front of a conspicuously enormous manor. It was the patriarch's residence, situated just north of the heart of the town.

There, they also found a gathering of the winged's warriors. Bonfires burned everywhere in the vicinity and watchtowers had been brought down to create makeshift barriers. In front of and behind this simple encampment, the winged commenced their offensive against the unknown enemy while defending their own position.

With the way their barricade was built, it normally would have separated the winged from their allies as well, but the construction didn't pose a problem for them because of their namesake wings. Naturally, these wings were also crucial to their fighting style, as they allowed the winged to make full use of the sky to engage in a sort of three-dimensional combat. Based on their proficiency as they fought aerially, it was easy to grasp that they were in their true element like this.

"Hmm. There are a lot of them, aren't there? I'll wrench the path open for us, so stay close to me!"

Nell stood in the shadow of the building, just behind the point where their allies were clashing with the enemy. As soon as she made that declaration, she charged into the fray, plunging forward with the force of a tightly drawn arrow and swinging the holy sword that had been sheathed at her waist. The enemy combatants had their hands full managing the winged both in the air and in front of them, so they couldn't react to Nell's daring rush from behind. Just like that, she and her friends managed to leap past the barricade without suffering any serious injuries themselves.

"Infernal scum! This is your doing, isn't it?!"

What awaited the three young women within the pseudo-encampment was the winged's patriarch. Added to his enraged voice, a single glance told them wrath suffused his entire being.

"P-Please wait, patriarch! You're wrong! We aren't responsible for

this!"

"My liege, calm yourself! These maidens saved countless of our people's lives! They are *not* the enemy!"

One of the winged's warriors fighting off the enemies inside the encampment rushed to pacify their leader. From Nell and her friends' perspectives, apart from the patriarch, who had an especially powerful physique, it was difficult to distinguish between individual winged folk. Based on what this man who'd come to their defense said, however, he was likely someone they had saved on their frantic journey here.

"I... I see. Forgive me. Thank you for aiding my people."

The patriarch heaved a sigh, his anger quieting as he apologized to the girls.

"Please don't worry about it! More importantly, can you give us any more information about what's happening here?!"

"The most probable explanation is that this is a surprise attack orchestrated by those blasted curs that are the fiends. I happened to recognize a few of them. It seems the bastards grew impatient waiting for our response to their proposal and this is their answer."

"The fiends!"

Nell and her friends had heard that name so often lately that they'd grown to despise the very mention of it. After all, it was the name of their enemy.

"But they're sorely mistaken if they think they can make us submit so easily! I'll grant that we're at a slight disadvantage because of the night assault, but anyone who underestimates the winged will taste regret at our hands!"

With those words, the winged's patriarch swung his giant naginata, which was apt for his size. It made a *whoosh* as it arced, slicing a charging black-clad enemy in two in a single stroke.

"We'll gladly help you! Ronia, you'll be supporting us! Mekina, you handle first aid for the wounded!"

"Roger!"

"Understood!"

"Apologies, humans, for getting you involved in our troubles!"

"You yourself said that we're your brethren now! What sort of brethren would we be if we *didn't* lend a hand in times of crisis?!"

Nell's incredibly fortitudinous words unwittingly made the patriarch crack a wide grin.

"One more thing, patriarch! It's best if we have light, yes?!"

"Correct! In the daylight, we can see beyond the hills, but our eyesight worsens considerably when night falls!"

The power of the winged's eyesight far outstripped other races' while the sun shone. Conversely, that power decreased dramatically at

night. In short, they suffered from nyctalopia, otherwise known as night blindness. This was the reason fires were currently burning everywhere; they could only fight after lighting up their surroundings as much as possible, keeping the darkness at bay.

Aware of the winged's weakness, the enemy continued to wage a fierce battle against them on the edges of each bonfire.

"Understood! Grant unto me your guidance, O Ancient Holy Spirit! Sacred Shine!"

As she chanted the spell, Nell raised her holy sword high overhead. Instantly, an intensely powerful ball of light shot forth from the tip of the blade. It hovered above their heads, illuminating the vicinity with such brightness that it almost felt like it was afternoon. And yet, despite how powerful it was, the light had no glare, and a warmth reminiscent of the sun's rested within it.

"Well done, maiden! My people, now is our time! Since these dogs were foolish enough to make enemies of us, leave none alive! Plunge each and every one of them into the realm of the dead!"

At their patriarch's order, the winged warriors roared. Then, perfectly coordinated under their leader's command, they charged toward their assailants.

Nell breathed an internal sigh of relief seeing them brim with such tremendous fighting spirit. *I think we should be able to manage now.* The moment she had that thought, a young man of the winged arrived, fully armored.

"Patriarch!"

"You're late! What in the world were you doing, my idiot son?!"

Nell and her friends could generally tell the difference between the winged's youth and elders by the colors of their feathers, but something about this particular young man seemed exceptionally familiar. She was sure she'd seen him somewhere before. As she trawled through her memory trying to ascertain his identity, Ronia, who stood next to her, whispered in her ear.

"He's the one who was the most hostile toward us during the meeting."

"Ah, right."

I see, so he's the patriarch's son. It was indeed the same person. Comprehending the situation, Nell once again took up a fighting stance as she prepared to confront the enemy.

"Ngh?!"

"What?!"

What greeted her instead, however, was the sight of the winged's patriarch coughing up blood, a blade thrusting out of his chest. And the one holding that blade was his son.

"My liege, no! Damn it all! Move!"

That was just one voice among the stunned cries of the winged's warriors. Panicked, they tried to rush toward their leader, but the continuous assault by the enemy hindered them, leaving them unable to go to him.

"Y-You...! How could...?!"

"Hah. You've grown complacent in your dotage, father, which is why you can no longer keep pace with me."

Dragging the knife out from his father's body, the patriarch's son wore a mocking expression and spoke derisively. Nell lay frozen for a moment, dumbfounded by what she had just witnessed, but the young man's words slapped her back into reality. She closed the gap between them in a single leap, swinging her sword at the patriarch's son. He easily evaded her slash and she used the opportunity to lift the patriarch's large frame with her own slender one, immediately withdrawing to the safety of her comrades.

"Mekina!"

"I know!"

Mekina raced toward the two of them, intent on starting treatment, but the patriarch himself refused her offer.

"Y-You mustn't move, my lord!"

"This barely...counts...as a scratch." The absurdity of the patriarch's words was underscored by the slightly unsteady way he said them. Even as he spat clumps of blood, he gripped the naginata that he hadn't let go of for even a moment and used it like a cane to gain purchase. Posture undaunted, he used one knee and his weapon to push himself to his feet. "I...see. So you were...the one...who allowed the enemy...entry into our settlement."

"That's right! I joined hands with the fiends because they're the ones who truly merit being drawn into our fold as brethren!"

"Bah... Foolish...son of mine. I see they...succeeded...in luring you to their cause."

"Say what you will, father! Together with my comrades and my new brothers-in-arms, I'll lead the winged! The only thing left for you to do is die!"

As soon as he spoke, a dozen or so of the winged lined up next to the patriarch's son. All young, their expressions overflowed with the vanity of youth.

"You imbeciles... Fine! Have it...your way! I shall use...my life...to give you an education...I was clearly...remiss in not giving sooner!"

With those sharp words, the patriarch brandished his naginata, which was no longer acting as a makeshift cane, even as blood gushed from his wound. Yet his stance was calm and measured.

"So, you choose death. None of this would have been necessary had you just yielded to our proposal."

One of the black-clad tossed those words at the patriarch. Other black-clad individuals slithered closer, forming a hostile contingent around them.

“Bah! Then let me tell you the reason we refused to follow you! It was your filthy tactics, just like this!” Those angry words exploded from the patriarch as he glared balefully at the black-clad. “Come at me, scum! You’ll pay dearly for attacking us so dishonorably!”

“Patriarch, we stand with you!”

“We pledge ourselves to you, my liege!”

Winged warriors gathered around the patriarch in support.

“Bah. If that’s your wish, who am I to deny you? Shall we all tread the path to the next realm together?”

The leader of the winged smiled widely, pleased by his comrades’ high spirits.

“P-Patriarch, please reconsider!”

“Go! It’s a father’s duty to make up for his child’s failings! Raaahhh!”

Thus began a fierce free-for-all melee, enemies and allies alike mixed into the confusion. The winged’s warriors bellowed monstrously, facing off against the enemy who outnumbered them overwhelmingly. Fervor heated the atmosphere along with the sharp clash of swords.

“Tch! You lot! Handle those humans—”

“You will not touch them!”

Obeying their leader’s order, one of the black-clad rushed toward Nell and her friends. But the patriarch intercepted the attack, ending the attacker’s life with a single stroke of his weapon.

“Go! Go now! If you truly wish to help us, take our injured warriors and civilians and leave this place!”

“Nell!” Ronia screamed with urgency.

“Grr! Right, let’s go! Patriarch, I have faith that we’ll meet again, so don’t you dare disappoint me by dying!”

“Bah, as if I’d lose to an enemy this weak! Reglis, Orias, take a few of the warriors and go with them. Closely guard the women and children who can’t fight. I’m counting on you!”

“On our lives, we serve you,” the two warriors responded in unison.

Regret suffusing her face, Nell reluctantly did as the patriarch instructed. Along with her friends, the winged’s civilians, and a handful of warriors deployed to protect them, she fled the settlement that had become a battleground.



Nell’s group was pursued relentlessly by the enemy. Thanks to the

patriarch and the warriors who had remained behind in the settlement, their pursuers appeared sporadically. No matter how many they defeated, though, new ones would come from seemingly nowhere. It felt like there was no end to the enemy's chase.

Nell wasn't certain precisely what sort of directive they had received, but based on their behavior, she wouldn't have been surprised to learn that it was "kill all hostiles." Regardless, the only thing she and the others could do was continue pressing forward.

"Nell! We need reinforcements!"

"I guess it's time, then. Ronia, use the Comm Orb!"

Though she was strongly averse to the idea of involving him in such a dangerous situation, the fact remained that she wasn't here alone. She understood how selfish her sense of morality was making her feel, so she tamped it down in order to do what needed to be done. She knew he was their only hope of rescue; the nearest town was much too far away, and it was entirely possible they would be defeated by the fiends' posse before they ever reached it. Moreover, Nell knew that he was powerful enough to reverse the despairing tides of their current situation. With things as bad as they were, she and her friends had no choice but to call for his aid.

So, with guilt clear on her face, Nell nevertheless agreed to the suggestion. Ronia nodded in acknowledgment, then, while still running, reached for the drawstring pouch secured to her waist. As she did, they heard several things whistling through the air in quick succession, slicing it viciously. Arrows were in flight.

Ronia was able to evade the projectiles because her Danger Detection ability had warned her of them. She had never been much of a fighter to begin with, which perhaps explained what happened next. Though she had dodged the arrows without suffering any harm, she hadn't been able to completely avoid one of them. It just so happened to graze her clothing by the slimmest of margins, yet that was enough.

Was it fate's mischief? Or the work of Satan himself as he smiled from atop his throne? That one arrow managed to whiz right through the knot holding the pouch to Ronia's waist. Unceremoniously snapped off, the bag obeyed gravity and fell, leading its contents to smash violently into the ground. The sound of a hard object breaking reverberated around them.

"Nh!"

"Pierce mine enemy! Sacred Arrows!"

Instantly, Nell turned around and launched several arrows of light in the direction the enemy arrows had come from.

"Follow her lead! Don't let the enemy draw near!"

Simultaneously, the few winged warriors sent with them as

protection for the civilians drew their own bows. They helped her return fire, loosing a volley of arrows at the enemy to keep them in check. In that brief span of time, Ronia hurriedly picked up her drawstring pouch and gazed inside even as she retreated to the safety of her comrades.

“Gah! Broken!”

“Which one, the red or the white?!”

“Both!”

Remorse and agitation emanated from Ronia’s usually impassive face. She gritted her teeth in frustration, evidently blaming herself for the state of the orbs. With their only lifeline now snapped, Nell herself almost gave in to the despair blackening her vision.

“Haah...”

Calm down. I know better than anyone that nothing good comes from panicking in a situation like this. She breathed in and out deeply. Once. Twice. Thrice. Forcing herself to maintain a cool head, she put her mind assiduously to the problem at hand.

“Ronia, can you fix them?!”

“I... I think so. I’ve been analyzing what sort of circuit they have inside since we got them, so I probably can. It’ll take me a few hours, though.”

“Okay. For now, keep running!”

“My, aren’t *you* strong? Consider me impressed, little one. Well done. Now, who’s next?”

After glancing at Mekina, who was treating the winged’s children and injured warriors with practiced skill, Nell turned back toward the warrior who sat across from her.

“All right, then, Mr. Reglis, what happened to the enemy?”

“Thanks to the Barrier of Illusion you created, we succeeded in shaking them off. But they’ve mobilized quite a few of their people, so it’s only a matter of time before they find us.”

“In short, you’re saying that it’s unlikely they’ll give up their pursuit?”

“Yes. After all, they attacked in the night like the craven bastards they are solely because we refused to obey them. It’s true that we demons follow the strong, but only on the condition that they act in a way befitting of their station by not dishonoring their strength or those weaker than them with such cowardly means. I know not why they chose to take such drastic measures against us, but the fact remains that they did. If we manage to escape their clutches, their ill repute will grow for their dastardly deeds tonight, garnering them criticism as well as the danger of weakening their power. That is why they won’t stop chasing us until they’ve eliminated us.”

The winged warrior Reglis agreed with Nell, his words heavy and solemn. Currently, their band of escapees was taking a brief respite some distance from the winged's settlement, in ruins forgotten by the hands of time. All around them huddled people in various conditions—some sat wearily at the foot of weathered statues while others shared what meager rations they had with each other to replenish their energy. The site resembled a field hospital.

Despite the crisis they were all in, not a single member of the winged showed so much as a hint of despair. Perhaps due to their nature as warriors, they all looked grimly resolved, prepared for any possibility up to and including the worst-case scenario of death. As such, they remained extremely organized and diligent as they went about their various tasks. Watching them like this, Nell knew they would have made a formidable presence in any war.

“Um, the nearest settlement is pretty far, isn't it?”

Orias, the other winged warrior seated with them, responded to her question.

“It is. From here, it would take two days on foot to reach. We can shorten the travel time by flying, but I imagine we'd be captured right away, ending our journey. There's also the matter of the children's stamina.”

Indeed, the winged's greatest advantage, the sky, was sealed off to them right now. Not only would they be apprehended if they flew in their present circumstances, but darkness still blanketed the land as well, so they wouldn't be able to fly properly due to their poor night vision. Consequently, they had spent the entirety of their perilous escape running alongside Nell and her friends.

“I suspect the enemy has already predicted that we're aiming for the closest town. Even should we arrive there, there's a strong probability they'll have already positioned their people ahead of it, lying in wait to ambush us.”

“Which means the only thing we can do now is rely on Ronia succeeding.”

Nell sneaked a peek at her close friend. At the moment, the other girl was focusing on her blunder—well, no one here actually blamed her because they understood the unusual situation they'd all been forced into. Nevertheless, Ronia felt deeply responsible for what she perceived as her mistake, so she was wholeheartedly devoting herself in body and in mind to the task of restoring the broken Comm Orbs.

Based on what Nell could see, the repair seemed to be proceeding apace. Their problem, however, was buying enough time for her to finish. If they were forced to flee again and thereafter stay constantly on the move, Ronia wouldn't be able to focus on her work, leaving the communication devices useless. On the other hand, staying in one

place came with the risk of eventual capture and violent assault. Either way, they were at a terrible disadvantage. *If we can at least stall for one more day, there might still be hope.*

"I hate to put a damper on the situation, but this reinforcement you spoke of...can we trust him? You mentioned that it's just one individual, yes?"

Nell nodded slowly in response to Reglis's question, which expressed his doubt.

"We can. I, at least, firmly believe it's worth staking everything I have on him. To be more specific, though, he's undoubtedly several times more powerful than I am. Actually, he's so strong that I don't really know exactly *how* strong he is."

"Oh, is that so? Then I'll take heart from your words and place my faith in him. If he is as strong as you say, I would have enjoyed engaging in a bout of fisticuffs with him in normal times."

"Agreed. Once we safely overcome this situation, I'd like to test my mettle against him myself."

Nell smiled wryly at Reglis and Orias's thoughtful remarks. Just then...

"Enemy forces approaching from the southwest! They'll make contact in minutes!"

One of the warriors who had gone to patrol the area rushed back into the ruins, warning them of the impending danger.

"Tch! Those villains won't even allow us a moment's rest!"

Tension snapping him tight, Reglis spat those words. Nell practically shouted her next question at him.

"Is there any other place we can escape to?!"

"Hmm... There's a valley a few hours from here that would be the perfect location to conceal ourselves. But there would be no point in heading there if we're discovered before we even reach it!"

"Understood."

Nell exhaled heavily when she heard his reply. A moment later, she broke into a run, heading straight in the direction the enemy was coming from.

"Ser Nell, what are you—"

"Partition! Absolute Barrier!"

In the next instant, an extremely massive barrier arose between her and the rest of her comrades. This was Nell's special ability, Barrier Magic, though in this particular case, "wall" might have been a better description than "barrier." The semitransparent wall was so massive that it separated her and her companions for several kilometers.

"Ser Nell!"

"Ser Nell?!"

The winged warriors shouted her name, banging fruitlessly on the wall that muffled their voices.

“Mr. Reglis, Mr. Orias, please take care of everyone!”

“But what about you?!”

“If... If you truly wish to help me, please protect Ronia. I trust you both, all right?”

Nell’s smile was a bit stiff as she spoke to them.

“Nell!”

“Nell, what are you doing?!”

Next up were Ronia and Mekina, who rushed toward the wall.

“Ronia, I need you to stay safe, follow everyone as far away as you can, and finish the repair, okay? Otherwise, I’ll die.”

“Don’t say something so stupid! Hurry up and take down this barrier—”

“Mekina, look after her. Oh, and make sure you keep treating the wounded, you hear?”

“I... Okay. Okay, I will.”

“Mekina?! Don’t agree with her! Stop her!”

Ronia’s heartbroken scream was accompanied by the faint sound of footsteps behind Nell.

“Darn it, they’re here already, huh? Go! Hurry! Now!”

“Ronia, we have to leave! Time marches on, never backward! Ever! Nell, listen to me! We haven’t accomplished any of our goals yet, so I absolutely forbid you from abandoning our mission by dying!”

“Argh! Fine! Nell, you better come back alive! If you don’t, I swear I’ll hunt you down myself!”

“Ser Nell, we’ll protect your friends with our lives!”

“May the fortunes of war favor you!”

For some reason, Nell thought their desperate words sounded strange to her ears. An unbidden giggle slipped from her lips. And then, while listening to the sound of her comrades’ footsteps fading away, she turned around on the spot and faced the footsteps steadily drawing near.

She remained silent as she noiselessly unsheathed her holy sword. Her blade glinted in the darkness, dimly lighting the area around her. *My magic... I still have enough.* Nell had used a great deal of it to create this wall, but half still remained. Moreover, her weapon of choice was a sword. Should her magic run out, she could fight as long as her body held up.

The footsteps grew increasingly distinct. She guessed that the enemy numbered a few dozen, possibly more.

I’m scared. Her legs were paralyzed in fear. Her heart beat faster and harder, growing so loud that she could hear it. If she dropped her

guard for even a second, she would collapse from the tremors wracking her body, unable to rise again. Honestly, she just wanted to wail and run away from this place, not caring what anyone thought of such shameful antics. Fate, however, had long since decreed otherwise, for she was a hero.

Since her childhood, Nell had wanted to become the kind of hero who protected everyone. She wanted to be their shield and stake her own life for theirs, to exercise her power for the sake of others, drive away evil demons, and bring peace to the world. That was why she couldn't flee here. Despite her inexperience, what little pride she had as a hero prevented her from running away at this juncture.

Nell's lips twitched as she tried earnestly to contort them into a smile reminiscent of a certain demon lord's.

"Well, now, do you really think I'll let you take a step further?" Grinning fearlessly, she brandished her holy sword.



"Did you create this barrier?"

From the depths of the forest, thirty, maybe forty or so black-clad individuals materialized out of the darkness itself. One of their members, a man, spoke to Nell. She thought he must be their commanding officer.

"I did. I built it using my true power, so you'll need a tremendous amount of strength to destroy it. If you seriously want to get past, I'd say your best method would be to defeat me."

"Hmph, so it seems. Kill her."

Unimpressed by her bravado, the commanding officer gave his order to his unit. They all moved as one to obey—but Nell was a step ahead of them and had already thrust herself into their midst.

"En garde!"

A flash of her holy sword accompanied her spirited cry, and the tip of her blade sliced through the nearest enemy. She didn't even check to see the result of her attack before she activated another of her special abilities, Swiftiness, to rush toward the enemy's commander. Upon reaching him, she swung her sword once more.

"Damn you!"

Despite the bullet-like momentum of her sword stroke, Nell only managed a shallow cut in the commander's torso, as he just barely evaded it. *Unfortunate that the wound isn't fatal.* Immediately, a counterattack of arrows assailed her.

"Pierce mine enemy! Sacred Arrows!"

She cleverly dodged the projectiles while chanting her spell. A dozen of her own arrows of light flew toward the enemy archers even as she herself raced in their direction. Then, a moment later, the

sound of several bodies hitting the ground could be heard. During her counterattack, other black-clad individuals drew various weapons suited for stealth attacks, like daggers and knives, from within their cloaks. They clearly intended to commence their own assault on her.

“Conceal! Barrier of Seclusion!”

The second she visually confirmed the attacking enemies’ positions, she produced a circular barrier directly around herself. It was even darker than the night’s darkness, so it hid her from the enemy’s view. Her attackers didn’t hesitate, though, instead charging headlong into her barrier with their weapons drawn, but none of them felt the sensation of a body being pierced by their blades.

“Hyah!”

Within the pitch-black barrier, Nell had crouched so low that she was almost lying on the ground. Once the enemies were within reach, she spun around in a single, powerful motion while swinging her holy sword right at an enemy’s torso. Her blade tore through flesh. Blood splashed onto her cheek.

After immobilizing more of the enemy directly surrounding her, Nell leaped from within the dark barrier. Again using Swiftess, she charged toward the commanding officer, her movement explosive. She sought to defeat only this man. He was her sole target because the only sliver of hope amid this hopeless situation, made even more fraught by the vast disparity in fighting power between her side and the enemy’s, was to defeat their commander. In doing so, she intended to throw the enemy unit into chaos.

With that purpose in mind, Nell acted, swinging at the enemy leader. But he seemed to have been on the alert for a second use of Swiftess, for this time, she inflicted no damage. He deflected her sword using his dagger. She pushed forward another step, intent on following up with another attack, but before she could, her Danger Detection ability reacted.

“Mpf!”

Obedying the information relayed by the ability, she quickly twisted her neck and dodged a small arrow launched at her from behind. Unfortunately, her focus on the arrow left her unable to evade the dagger the commander hurled at her. It ripped through her flesh near the top of her shoulder.

“That...hurts...!”

Nell immediately jumped back, creating much-needed distance between herself and the enemy leader. From the corner of her eye, she spotted a black-clad she had slain lying on the ground. They should have been dead, especially in light of the lethal amount of blood pooling around them. Yet even as they lay there dying, they aimed a bowgun attached to their arm at her.

Not good! It wouldn't be long before they finally breathed their last and stopped moving, but she had to finish what she'd started *now*. If she didn't, she would be leaving herself vulnerable to an attack that would lead to her death.

"Move away! Don't get too close to her!"

The rest of the black-clad followed their commander's orders without delay. They stepped back a safe distance and then launched a salvo of arrows at her in tandem. Nell rolled low to the ground to avoid the arrows, simultaneously swinging her sword to slash at a number of them. But she couldn't possibly guard against such a multitude, so unfortunately for her, a few plunged into her body.

"Ow... Aaahhh!"

Nell screamed in a desperate attempt to dispel the agony. In the interim, she chose to change her target from the commander to his troublesome subordinates in the vicinity. Ignoring the pain coursing through her, she launched herself at the nearest of them.

They immediately tried to increase the distance between them, but she was much too fast. Her blade caught them before they could take another step. One person. Two. Three. Four. She attacked successively, her seamlessly flowing movements inflicting fatal wounds on her enemies. And as another blast of arrows rained down on her, she leaped back a tremendous distance. With the barrier wall once more against her back, she took up a longpoint stance with her holy sword.

"Heh heh. Is this all you have to show for yourselves? It's certainly not enough to defeat me. I believe you may need more reinforcements?"

Nell grinned boldly as the enemy forces closed in on her. Her smile served two purposes: masking her pain and attracting the enemy's attention.

"Hmph. What a fine suggestion. Allow me to heed it and increase our numbers, then."

As he spoke, more black-clad appeared one after another from the depths of the forest. There were so many of them—even more than had been in the initial group—that it was impossible to count the exact number at a single glance.

"You are dangerous. Infinitely more dangerous than those half-wit winged. That makes you our enemy, which means you die here."

The enemy commander's sharp eyes pierced right through Nell. It was as if he had ascertained her very nature, the boundless heights of her potential as a hero. His voice was cold and cruel as he spoke.

Ugh... Watching him, Nell found herself smiling unintentionally, as if she had come to some sort of philosophical realization. Perhaps she had, because her next thought was... *Oh, put a sock in it, you*

“Haah... Haah...”

How many times had Nell swung her sword by now? Her arms were as weighty as poles and her body felt as sluggish and heavy as lead. A lethargy she had never experienced before gnawed at her very bones. Her throat was dry and hunger pangs viciously assailed her stomach. She felt so light-headed that she could collapse any second.

I think...I might have lost too much blood. It was oozing continuously from multiple cuts in her body as well as the arrows still stuck in her shoulders and side. Moment by moment, her wounds robbed her of her physical strength. She was in such an awful state that she couldn't even keep one of her eyes open properly because of the blood flowing from the cut on her forehead.

To add insult to injury, she had depleted her magic some time ago. She had been making do because Durendal, her holy sword, contained its own store of magic, but its reserves would run out soon as well.

The sun had long since risen. Nell's giant wall, her Absolute Barrier, had dissolved quite a while back, which explained why she was now fighting the enemy while trying to escape through the forest. Evidently, the enemy unit had decided to set their sights on her instead of the fleeing winged, resulting in their current tenacious pursuit of her. They must have judged that she posed a much greater threat in the long run, especially for their future, and determined that they would rather kill her than the handful of winged warriors and civilians.

In that sense, Nell could say she had accomplished her goal of allowing her friends and comrades to escape. The unvarnished truth, however, was that she had been driven into a corner. She crawled on the ground, trudged through patches of mud, shook off the enemy using her Barrier of Illusion, concealed herself using her Barrier of Seclusion, and used every other conceivable method in her desperate flight. Even so, it seemed the enemy possessed some sort of tracking skill, because they were never far behind. They always found her, and each time they did, they whittled away at her increasingly scant strength. Despite her nerves and anxiety both having reached a breaking point, she had somehow managed to keep herself alive. But fatigue weighed down every inch of her, and she knew she was very nearly at her limit.

No, that wasn't quite right. She had long since passed her limit. Right now, the only thing that kept her going was sheer willpower. She didn't know how many enemies she had defeated or how many hours she had fought; she swung her sword only in obedience to her

survival instinct. And so, she had kept running in the forest for however long. Then, suddenly, her field of view expanded.

“No...!”

Crap. A grassy field spread out in front of Nell. It was wide and disgustingly easy to survey. She had somehow managed to find her way out of the forest.

“Hmph. You certainly didn’t make this easy for us.”

From behind her came the voice of the enemy commander. The man had pursued her so obstinately that an objective viewer might call his persistence madness. Nell promptly turned around and readied herself for battle, but her initial response was a beat too slow. A black-clad rushed within arm’s reach of her and punched her hard in the stomach.

“Ngh!”

Nell’s consciousness fluttered. With her movements extremely dulled, she slumped forward from the impact of the punch. Another black-clad raced toward her and kicked at the hand holding her holy sword. Strength fading from her body, she let the sword fall from her grip, further weakened by the latest series of assaults.

Now that they had disarmed her, each of the black-clad roughly grabbed one of her arms. Then, they kicked her in the backs of her legs, forcing her to her knees. From there, they shoved her to the ground, where they leaned onto her torso to pin her down and effectively immobilize her.

“Haah... Haah... Do you intend to send a message by killing me?”

She glared up at the enemy leader standing in front of her, who hadn’t killed her right away. Panting heavily, she spat those words at him.

“You put us through a great deal of trouble, so let me enjoy myself now, eh? And I’m man enough to admit I might have changed my mind. You see, I like strong women. Strong women such as yourself.”

“Well, I hate...men...like you.”

Nell’s response came without hesitation. The enemy commander only smiled and crouched down in front of her.

“That’s it. That completely unbreakable attitude. I’ll carry you to my estate and discipline that body of yours so much that you’ll loathe me even more. I wonder how long it’ll take for me to train you until you wag your tail like a good little puppy for its master?”

Smirking lasciviously at her, the enemy commander stroked Nell’s cheek with his fingers. His disgusting touch made her want to shiver. It felt like a swarm of insects was crawling over every inch of her body. Yet she forced herself not to cower, remaining undaunted as she continued glaring at him.

“Not to mention that it would be a waste to snuff out your life

here after you demonstrated your talents by killing so many of my subordinates. What say you to switching to our side, hm? I can guarantee you'll make fine memories with me—with us."

The man grabbed her chin as he spoke. She instinctively wanted to rebel at his forced touch, but she forced down the savage words welling up inside her. Instead, she contained her agitated emotions, so when she replied, her voice flowed out flat and smooth.

"Let's...suppose I join you. Will you grant my comrades their freedom?"

"Yes, of course. They're no longer of any use to us. I swear to you that I'll let them go if you agree."

His smile hollow, the black-clad commanding officer answered disingenuously, giving her that bald-faced lie.

"I...see."

Nell pretended to consider his proposal, her expression seemingly clouded in thought. She gradually allowed her stiff body to slacken, creating the impression that she no longer had any intention of resisting. And just as she expected, when her captors felt her muscles relaxing, they very slightly eased the pressure they were using to restrain her.

Their carelessness granted her an opportunity, and she certainly wouldn't let it slip by. As soon as their hold on her loosened, she used the moment to shake her left arm as hard as she could, shoving away that black-clad. She then immediately withdrew something that had been tucked into the back of her pants. With it, she cut off the enemy commander's hand, the one still grasping her chin, at the wrist.

"Gaaahhh!!!"

She wasted no time in slashing at the arms of the two black-clad who had restrained her. Once free of them, she wrung out what little strength she had left and made a huge jump backward, shifting her weapon, Gekka, to her other hand. Nell had kept the dagger on her person ever since a certain young man had gifted it to her. She'd trained extra hard to become worthy of wielding it, to the point that her Dagger Combat ability was already at level 3 after a relatively short amount of time.

"Here's my answer to your invitation! I politely decline! I'd rather die here fighting than join forces with the likes of you!"

In addition, the probability of these people actually keeping their word to not attack the others once she sided with them was most certainly zero. Nell wasn't dumb enough to take a risk on impossible odds like that, so the only choice left was to make as much of a nuisance of herself as she could. That was the only way she could increase the chances of survival for her friends and comrades, even if it was only by a little.

“Ngh! Fine! You can seethe with regret while you die! You lot had better seize her! And when you do, don’t kill her right away! Torture, humiliate, and violate her to your hearts’ content! Only when she has nothing left to give are you allowed to mangle her broken body and kill her!”

The enemy commander protectively cradled the arm missing its hand. He spewed orders heatedly at his subordinates, rage oozing out of him.

I guess this is where I die. That was the only thought in her mind as she watched the black-clad charge toward her. But if she was going to die anyway, it made her happy knowing that she had fought until the bitter end for the sake of her friends and comrades. This way, her long-cherished ambition would finally be realized, as, despite her inexperience, she could at least say she had acted in a way that did not dishonor her title of “hero.”

I wish I could have seen Mr. Yuki one last time... She didn’t have to worry about him, though. Nell knew he would protect everyone without fail. He would appear out of the blue like he always did, his nonchalant grin on his face, and do something shocking to rescue everyone, saving their lives. Thinking about him warmed her heart, and a smile blossomed naturally on her lips.

The gap between her and her enemy shortened tremendously. A jumble of emotions filled her chest as she watched. Fear. Anguish. Worry. Unease. Rage. Sadness. And with them, an overflowing will to fight that refused to be extinguished.

“Aaaaahhhhh!!!”

Nell’s howl came from the depths of her soul, from the feelings running berserk within her heart.

Suddenly, something descended from the sky with aggressive force, its landing in the grassy field shaking the ground violently. The impact was so powerful that it created a towering cloud of dust. It also caused the black-clad men intent on attacking her to stumble a few steps. Nell had protected her face using her arms when she felt the crash, and through a gap between her limbs, she could see the enemy as they struggled to orient themselves.

“Sup, Nell? How ya been?”

From beyond the haze came the voice of the person she’d been eagerly awaiting—of the person she’d been thinking about until just a few moments ago. As the dust slowly settled, she saw the silhouette of a young man carrying a giant weapon on his shoulder.

Ahhh.

“Honestly... You’re late, Mr. Yuki.”

She wanted to cry. She was overjoyed. A fire burned within her chest. All those complicated emotions somehow conveyed themselves

in her tone. Eyes moist with unshed tears, lips pouting just the slightest bit, Nell said those words to him.



Phew. Made it in the nick of time.

“What the heck, Nell? You’re a freakin’ mess. Not exactly living up to your hero status, are ya?”

“Sh-Shut it. I’ll have you know...that I worked myself...to the bone.”

The still-panting hero girl sounded kinda testy. I saw blood oozing from all over her body and some arrows still stuck in her shoulder and side. Her clothes had rips everywhere and were caked in blood and dirt, so they were completely ruined. Not to mention her filthy hair. A single glance at the total mess that was her appearance was enough for anyone to get an idea of how hard and valiantly she’d fought. The reality of her stat bars was proof of her struggle too—her MP was dangerously close to zero and her HP had dropped below ten percent.

When Haloria had notified me of the trouble after my match with the old butler ended, she’d given me the Comm Orb. Immediately, I’d had En do her jet engine thing and flown out of the arena at light speed, heading straight in the direction indicated by the orb. Since En herself had run out of magic, I’d been in charge of controlling both the flames and the air currents. But I’d had a bitch of a time tuning the energy output, so there’d been way too many times where we’d nearly crash-landed.

My reckless, unhinged race to Nell and company ended up being worth it, though, because it’d taken less than an hour to reach my destination. Once I was there, I’d found a group of demons called the winged who could best be described as war-torn refugees. I’d also found Little Miss Royal Conjurer, that friend of Nell’s I’d met at that pub way back when. With red, swollen eyes from crying and an incredibly agitated aura, she’d begged me to “Save Nell! Please!”

I’d only ever seen the girl calm and collected, so her loss of self-control had told me just how bad the situation was. Feeling a measure of panic myself, I’d blasted up into the sky and hauled ass, filling in Maps as I went. I’d needed as much information as I could get, and fast. Maps had blipped, showing me a group of hostiles in a direction from which I could hear the faint sounds of some sort of commotion. I’d flown over as quickly as I could and discovered that the situation really *was* as bad as I’d imagined.

Surrounding the young hero were a good number of those godforsaken black-clad sons of bitches I’d confronted countless times. Despite these particular assholes seeming to be special forces or whatever, they looked absolutely dumbfounded by my sudden arrival,

which also led to the tension stretching Nell's body taut abruptly dissolving. Swaying, she fell forward because of her slackened nerves, but I caught her before she hit the ground.

"Easy now. But dammit, Nell, why didn't you just call me sooner?"

"Right...about that... I'm sorry. The truth...is that we...accidentally...broke the...magical device..."

Nell seemed a bit embarrassed as she spoke to me from within my arms.

"Wait, what? For real? Then how the hell did you guys activate it?"

"I think...Ronja managed...to mend it. She's really...good at...things like that."

Oh, right, that's Little Miss Royal Conjurer's name. Good to know she's got other special skills too.

"Wh-Who are you?!"

"Keep your goddamn traps shut. Not a word out of *any* of you."

Finally starting to get a grasp of the situation, one of the black-clad raised his voice aggressively at us. I spat those words in response at him, then rapidly put a wall of high-speed water currents between us and them. No way they could penetrate it to get to us.

"All righty, Nell. The only way we can get you on the road to recovery is by pulling out these arrows. It's gonna hurt like a bitch, but be a champ and put up with it for a bit, 'kay?"

A Super Potion healed wounds completely, but the liquid couldn't tell if there were any foreign objects in the injuries, so it would close over a wound with the object still embedded in the person's body.

"Okay... I will."

Two arrows were stuck in her. *Hmm, let's see...* Based on what I knew of arrows, forcibly removing one meant running the risk of the arrowhead snapping off and staying in the body. Luckily—if you could call it that—both arrows had pierced all the way through Nell; I could see the arrowheads sticking out. We didn't have to worry about that particular danger, at least, which meant there was no need to deliberately create exit wounds in her body to pull out any errant arrowheads.

I gently lowered Nell to the ground before breaking the first arrow's shaft at the fletching. Then, with a "Here I go!" I yanked on the arrowhead, pulling the rest of the arrow out in one fell swoop. Blood immediately spewed from the wound, splashing on my face.

"Ngh... Tee hee, another mask for a disguise, Mr. Yuki? Oh, you changed your hair color too. It looks like Lefi's."

Sweat dripped profusely down Nell's face, probably from the pain. But she still smiled bravely at me.

“Sure did. I look sick, right? I’ve got an extra, so I’ll totes give it to you if you want it.”

“Hmm... I think I’ll take you up on that.”

“Even though you turned me down when I offered in Arsil? You’ve sure changed your tune, eh?”

While I quipped back at her, I did to the other arrow plunged into her flesh what I’d done to the first.

“Hngh! Yes...indeed I did. I suddenly...have a desire...to look dashing too.”

“Oho, so you finally understand the appeal, do you? That’s what I call self-improvement. Good job, Nell. You can definitely have the spare.”

Grinning, I pulled the backup mask I’d made plus a bottle of Super Potion from Inventory. I placed the mask on top of her body.

“Here you go. It’s all yours. Now then, it’s time for you to down the potion. Take it slow, but you need to drink the whole thing, okay?”

I scooped her into my arms again and placed one under her head, raising it just enough to let her easily swallow the liquid. Then, I tugged the stopper off the bottle using my other hand and nudged the spout toward her lips.

“Mpf... Nh...”

The results were immediately visible. In the blink of an eye, the wounds covering Nell’s body closed up. Only a few seconds later and her soft, fair skin was back to its original unmarred state. At the same time, her HP shot back up. Watching the numbers climb once more, I unthinkingly breathed a quiet sigh of relief.



“That should do it.”

“Really? Then I should...be able...to fight— Ugh!”

“The potion only heals wounds, dummy. It doesn’t restore your physical strength.”

I flicked Nell on her forehead for saying stupid shit and forced her to stay down.

“Besides, I bet your whole body feels heavy, right? Listless, even? So you should just, mm, sleep. That’s *exactly* what you need to do. I’ll handle everything else. Those bastards, your friends, everything. One way or another, I’ll take care of things.”

I shrugged and spoke to her jokingly so she wouldn’t worry.

“Okay...got it. Thank you...Mr. Yu... I...lov...”

Dammit, I knew she went too hard. I had no idea what she’d been trying to say, but before she could finish her sentence, her body went totally limp and she conked out in seconds. The only sound I could hear from her now was her breathing as she slept.

Remaining silent, I opened the Inventory rift again and pulled out the special teleportation necklace that returned the user to the dungeon. I slipped it over her head and onto her neck, then pushed my magic into it to activate the sorcerous circuit contained within. Once I did, Nell’s form quickly faded from sight as she lay in my arms, and a few moments later, she’d disappeared completely.

She should be in the real throne room right about now. She was in for the shock of her life when she finally woke up. This put her in an awkward, inconvenient position considering all the political maneuvering she’d been doing in the demon world, but... *Whatever, it is what it is.* She’d worked so damn hard that she’d literally been at the end of her rope when I’d found her. Nobody could complain about her getting some rest, and if they wanted to, they could take it up with me.

“Sorry about this, En, but I’m gonna put you in Inventory for just a little while.”

“Okay...”

With one word, she agreed telepathically, guessing what I had planned. *What a good girl. Thanks, kiddo.*

After storing her in the rift, I pushed myself up from my kneeling position and swept my hand to the side, dispelling the wall of high-speed water currents. On the other side, various black-clad individuals faced me, weapons drawn.

“Who the hell are you?! Don’t think we’ll allow you to meddle in our business! Where is the woman?!”

I said nothing in response to his question. Instead, I closed the gap between us in a single, powerful lunge. Once I was right in front of

him, I simply grabbed his head and, without suppressing any of my power, crushed his skull in a vise grip.

“Auuughhhhh!!!”

His scream was so grating on my ears that I wanted to rip his tongue out to shut him the hell up. I kept squeezing, though. I thought for sure it'd be a matter of seconds until his brains exploded from his shattered cranium, but before that happened, another black-clad dingus rushed me with a dagger. Twisting my body, I dodged the attack easily, then flung the asshole in my grip at his comrade who'd just charged me. There was the dull sound of flesh slamming against flesh, followed by both of them tumbling to the ground.

It didn't take long for the remaining black-clad in the vicinity to realize they were under attack. Acting as a group, they drew their bows and loosed so many arrows that I would've turned into some sort of freaky-ass hedgehog had they struck. Except that not a single one hit me, because the second their arrows started to fly, I used elemental magic to create a gale-like barrier around me that repelled every last one. A few of them had had their initial velocity boosted by magic to increase their piercing ability, but the power of my magic was higher than theirs. Something so low-level was nowhere close to being a threat to me, and I could feel the black-clad starting to get uneasy once they understood that their attacks had no effect on me whatsoever.

I guess I'm more fond of Nell than I thought. In light of the violent emotion rampaging through my chest, burning me raw from the inside, this unexpected epiphany was an understatement to say the least. Right now, my blood was boiling and my fury knew no bounds. Iluna's kidnapping was the last time I'd been this enraged. A savage urge to destroy everything in sight had seized control of my brain, forcing my body to obey it.

I'm a selfish person. A self-centered, incurably egocentric man who lived my life according to my own rules. In a sense, you could say that I embodied what it truly meant to be a demon lord. I didn't believe in virtue for virtue's sake. Philanthropy? Charity? What a bunch of crap. And those so-called “saintly people” who extended their hands to people in need? Honestly, they gave me a serious case of the creeps. All I felt for them was disgust.

I spent my days in the dungeon with my little troupe of folks and had exchanged vows with Lefi. Everything I did was ultimately for my own sake. I had zero shame in saying this straight-out.

That was exactly why I felt the way I did now. I never wanted the things and people in my life to be corrupted or defiled. I never wanted my world to be trampled on. And without even being aware of when or how it happened, somewhere along the line, I'd ended up counting

Nell as one of those vital parts of my life.

“I’m gonna make you shitsuffer before you die.”

I snarled those words and pulled a dagger from Inventory. Then, I shoved a massive amount of magic into it to activate its sorcerous circuit, which only took a few seconds to fully charge. All around me, I heard shouts of “Kill him!” and while the black-clad scrambled to commence their attack, I made my move by throwing my dagger toward the feet of the man I’d hurled moments earlier, who was struggling to get up.

I didn’t even need to check where the dagger had pierced the ground; I knew my aim was good, so I flapped my wings hard and flew out of the sorcerous circuit’s effective range. Obviously clueless, the man momentarily went from angry to befuddled when he saw me act.

“Huh?! What is this?! What iiis thiiiiis?!”

He started screaming out of nowhere and abruptly turned toward something invisible, terror radiating from his body. He then started writhing on the ground, arms and legs flailing wildly, clearly in agony. His comrades were dumbfounded as they watched him lose his sanity. Too bad for them, whatever was affecting him didn’t stop at just him. It spread right away, infecting them as well, and they also started to suffer.

“Gah! Gagagagi! Gaaah!”

“It-It hurts! It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts!”

“D-Don’t look at me! Don’t look at meeeee!”

Some of them tore at their own chests. Others were so frightened that they curled up into tight balls, shaking so hard from fear that someone might’ve thought they were having seizures. A few gouged out their own eyes, tearing their eyeballs out of their sockets with a gross squishing sound. Soon enough, a titanic chorus of screams, wails, and meaningless, babbling chants overtook the area.

Let me tell you about that very special dagger. For one, I’d constructed it out of mythrill. And for two, using my level 10 Sorcerer’s Grant ability, I’d installed the Nightmare sorcerous circuit in it. Once the circuit was activated, it worked on any living thing within a specific radius. It unleashed an intensely powerful hallucinogenic that, just as the name described, showed its targets their nightmares.

Well, “nightmares” was the simplest way to describe it. First, consider the absolute chaos it’d created here. Next, the indisputable fact that the circuit itself could only be learned when Sorcerer’s Grant reached level 10, which was evidently god-level, or so it was said. In light of all that, it was easy to guess the extent of the hallucinations it caused.

On top of that, because each target's nightmare consumed the individual's magical reserves to work, their trip from one hell to another wouldn't end until every last bit of their magic had been drained. The best part? It was designed to deplete their MP gradually, a little bit at a time. Tick, tock. Tick, tock. A diabolical, sadistic game of sorts, if you will. By the time their MP *did* hit rock bottom, they would completely lose their minds and become broken husks. But only if they didn't commit suicide first, the unbearable fear making them hit their breaking point halfway through. And on the very slim chance that they somehow managed to hold on to their consciousness, it wasn't like they could fight properly without magic.

For those reasons, I'd needed to craft this dagger using mythril. The sorcerous circuit Nightmare devoured a huge amount of magical energy to operate. When I'd created dagger prototypes utilizing lesser metals, they'd started melting during the process of being imbued with magic. That had essentially made it impossible to even activate the circuit.

Mythril was a rare metal that could very efficiently stockpile and conduct magical energy. That said, even it wasn't powerful enough to withstand the colossal power output of the circuit. Once activated, the blade liquefied from the massive amount of energy, meaning the weapon could only be used one time. It was possible to get a few more uses out of a weapon if it was crafted from a metal stronger than mythril, but those metals required truckloads more DP. Plus, the weapon would inevitably break regardless, so mythril was the smart choice from a cost perspective.

In short, it was way too expensive to even make a single unit, meaning it couldn't be mass-produced in any sense. All of these factors relegated it to the status of a last-resort method of attack. Still, it was the perfect gift to give to these cocksuckers.

Anyway, there I was, hovering in the sky above Nightmare's effective range, watching shit go down. *Looks like it's starting to peter out.* A few had stopped moving like the threads of their lives had been snipped while others convulsed as various bodily fluids seeped out of them. Several who'd managed to hold on to some semblance of sanity seemed deeply relieved at finally being able to move their bodies of their own volition again. Naturally, they promptly picked up their weapons and slit their own throats to escape the hellish torture.

In the middle of all this, I noticed someone who, compared to his comrades, was still in control of his faculties. He crawled on the ground, desperately trying to escape this place. It was the man who'd lashed out at me when I'd first showed up and who was most likely the enemy's commanding officer. I assumed so, at least, since he'd been giving orders to his unit this whole time.

Well, well. What do we have here? You've got quite the pair on ya, huh? Great timing, actually, because I had some questions to ask. He could live a little longer by helping me answer them, and then I'd be generous and let him die.

After I made sure the dagger was broken and its sorcerous circuit contained, I free-fell right in front of the bastard trying to run away. Once I was on the ground, I stood there real casual-like.

"Eek!"

I smirked at the man as that short shriek spilled from his mouth. From the perspective of an outsider, I knew my smile must've looked incredibly brutal as I spoke to him.

"Sup, dickwad? Where ya headed, hmm? If you're goin' on a walk, whaddya say I come with, yeah?"



"Ladies and gentlemen, with the semifinal bout up next, there aren't many matches left to watch!"

Lured in by the emcee's excitement, the voltage in the arena sparked up another notch.

"Allow me to introduce our fighters! Possessed of infinite arrogance and no fear whatsoever, this man has shown us incredible fights thus far! Of course, that means expectations are high for another rousing display! Say hello to Upsiloon!"

I stayed quiet in response to the audience's cheers, instead just striding to the center of the arena, En hoisted on my shoulder.

"Now, his opponent! Shape-shifting arms and legs means any wild, unconventional attack is possible for this man! He's defeated innumerable people with his tricky movements! It's Mejagriiii!"

Stepping into the arena from the other side was a man who had abnormally long arms and legs. Each arm had two joints and a cloth covered his mouth. Studying his appearance, I realized he was one of the people the Demon King had told me to watch out for a while back.

"Kee hee hee. Hey, what're you doing here? Don't you know I've got orders to pound you into a messy pulp?"

I kept my mouth shut. Seeing that he wasn't getting a reaction out of me, the long-armed, long-legged man shrugged like I was hopeless, his expression saying that he was already bored.

"C'mon, can't you be a little friendlier? Kee hee, not that it'll matter in the end. I'm gonna beat you until you run home crying to your mommy like the pathetic dunce you are!"

The moment the gong clanged, signaling the start of the match, I closed the gap between us so fast it probably looked like I'd teleported. Then, I swung the still-sheathed En at his face with all my

might.

“Ngh!”

In all my tournament matches until now, I’d never once used such a lame surprise attack. Surprise, surprise, that’d made him cocky, meaning he never saw it coming and his initial response was a beat too slow. Having climbed his way to the semifinals, the long-limbed man reacted quickly in defense, revealing that his abilities weren’t just for show. But unfortunately for him, the cost of being caught off guard, even for a moment, was high.

I noticed right away when he tried to protect himself, so I immediately changed the trajectory of my swing, aiming for his completely unguarded torso. He couldn’t adjust in time to deal with the new arc of my sword, which meant En’s sheathed blade rammed hard into his abdomen. He took the full brunt of the blow and, obeying the law of inertia, rocketed backward until slamming into the arena wall stopped his involuntary flight. My adversary didn’t make a single peep as he slowly slid down the wall and crumpled to the floor.

“And the winner is Upsilooooon!”

Me settling the match in a single instant made the spectators lose their minds, roaring at the emcee’s announcement. Ordinarily, this would’ve been the moment I exited the arena, but I stayed right where I was despite the match being over. *Jesus tap-dancing Christ, why the hell am I wasting my time on small fry?* I had too many other things to focus on that were way more important than a loser like him.

Ignoring both the audience’s cheers and the event staff’s confused stares directed at me, I took a few steps toward the long-armed, long-legged man’s sword. He hadn’t once unsheathed the thing, which was lying on the ground near me. I picked it up, casually lifted it high overhead, and pulled my shoulder back. Then, I threw it as hard as I could. It spun around and around in the air as it flew off with great force, heading straight for the scumbag leader of the fiends as he sat cockily in his chair, legs stretched out and looking down on me with his chin resting in his hand.

“What in the—?!”

The emcee sounded flabbergasted, letting that shout slip unintentionally. Terrified shrieks erupted from the bleachers too. My aim was true as the sword raced toward the damned fiends’ leader’s head, but the asshole tilted his neck to the side, evading my attack. With a *swoosh*, its blade pierced into the well-made chair the jerkoff was sitting in.

Everyone in the stadium froze at my unexpected, eccentric behavior. Their eyes focused completely on me. I didn’t pay attention to any of it, though. The arm I’d used to hurl the sword stayed extended, and I clenched my hand into a fist and pointed my thumb—

and only my thumb—down at the arena floor. What did I mean by this? “Get your ass down here,” of course. My signal was clear as day, with no room whatsoever for any misunderstanding.

Under normal circumstances, an action as outrageous as throwing a weapon at a VIP of a nation would never be tolerated. If I’d pulled this shit on Earth, I would have been arrested on the spot. Hell, even in this world, it’d be par for the course to sentence me to death for such reckless conduct. In *normal* circumstances, that is. But for better or for worse, we were in the *demon* world now, and *nothing* about this was normal.

“S-Such audacity! Of all things, th-this man has essentially declared war on Lord Gozim! I-Is there truly not an ounce of fear to be found in him?!”

Finally getting a handle on the situation, the emcee began giving live, heated coverage as the situation unfolded.

“Gozim! Gozim! Gozim! Gozim!”

The audience, taken in by the emcee’s enthusiasm, chanted the sumbitch’s name. It didn’t take a genius to figure out what they wanted: a very near future where the arrogant challenger got his ass pounded into the dirt by their anointed leader. Viewing this challenge as just another part of the performance, the spectators now craved to see the conceited challenger transformed into a bloody, defeated lump of meat in the arena. *Never underestimate the power of the masses, huh?*

Let’s say for argument’s sake that the leader of the fiends chose not to step into the arena. If he did that, he’d be branded a coward for running away from a fight with me. Actually, since I was really just a proxy for my ally, the Demon King, he would be running away from *him*. And I had no doubt that Fynar the Blackheart would gleefully use his enemy’s newfound notoriety against him. He’d take every opportunity to spread the news that Gozim was a sissy. Rumors would spread like wildfire through the demon world.

On the other hand, if he accepted my challenge and faced me head-on, he’d be giving me exactly what I wanted. I wished he would hurry up and get a move on already, ‘cause ya boy was *itching*, absolutely freakin’ *dying*, to cut his fucking head off.

Hurry up, dude. Faster. Chop-chop. Get down here right the hell now. One-on-one, you and me. A fight to the death. Let’s. Fucking. Go.

“Gozim! Gozim! Gozim! Gozim!”

“Tch. Imbeciles.”

Despite his impassive face, the leader of the fiends, Gozim, expressed his ire in the way he made that remark. The stadium resounded with the unending shouts of the audience as they chanted his name again and again.

“My lord, you mustn’t react to his challenge! Not only do we have no inkling of what he’s planning, but we can’t allow you to endanger yourself here!” one of his attendants beseeched him urgently.

“I know.”

Still sitting in his chair, Gozim used one hand to pull the sword out of the back of his chair and tossed it aside. He was well aware of the threat the masked man posed. All one needed to do was watch him fight and they would understand in due course the frightening strength he possessed. However, the man hadn’t demonstrated his true power thus far.

Due to the structure of the tournament, he fought normally enough, but Gozim knew that his fighting style was deliberately inefficient because his goal was to attract attention rather than display any real combat prowess. In short, the masked man had yet to fight seriously.

He had revealed a glimpse into his real abilities only once, which was when he had fought the human. Even then, though, he had fought carefully, holding back so as not to kill his opponent. Clearly, that was nowhere near the full extent of his true might. Gozim knew without a doubt that the masked man’s capabilities would jump exponentially in a real battle to the death. In such a situation, he would exhibit powers far beyond what he’d shown in any of his previous tournament bouts.

“Oh *my*, don’t tell me *you* intend to tuck tail and *run* from this challenge?”

Gozim turned his head to look at the individual next to him, the Demon King Fynar, who didn’t even attempt to conceal the derisive smile on his face.

“So this is your doing?”

“Not at *all*. I *myself* am shocked, actually. He *certainly* keeps things *interesting*, don’t you think?”

The Demon King beamed, delighted from the bottom of his heart. Not even he had anticipated this turn of events. He privately thought that it would have been nice if Yuki had given him some kind of advance warning, but he couldn’t very well fault the young man. Based on his subordinate’s report, Yuki had been seething with rage since yesterday—a fury he hadn’t bothered to keep under wraps that was fueling a deep, intense bloodlust. After learning about it, a small part of Fynar had idly wondered if he might unleash it and instigate something.

He hadn’t predicted his ally would act so outrageously, though. Still, regardless of how the situation panned out, the probability was high that it would ultimately be to Fynar’s advantage. It was just another card in his hand. Consequently, he was in an extraordinarily grand mood as he watched the scene before him develop.

“I *personally* see no issue with *rejecting* the challenge. After *all*, your people would be utterly *devastated* if their beloved, cherished leader—akin to a *babe* in the woods as far as *they* are concerned—were to be *injured*, hm?”

“Hah. As if I would ever turn down a challenge. What utter nonsense.”

“M-My lord!”

Gozim sneered at the Demon King’s provocation and leisurely rose from his seat. Shaking off his attendant’s attempts to stop him, he bounded down to the arena with tremendous force.

Yes. Yes! Here he comes!

His landing shook the ground lightly as he jumped down from his seat. He casually started walking toward me, and then, there was an explosion. Columns of dust and smoke covered the area in the immediate aftermath of the violent shock wave. Screams mixed in with the commotion rising from the bleachers where the annoying, easily excitable spectators sat.

A magical land mine had caused the detonation. I’d set it up before the asshole had touched down.

“You truly believed a petty trick like this would work on me?”

As the smoke and dust gradually cleared, the ginger bastard stood there as if nothing had happened. His unruffled expression pissed me off even more. I thought for sure he would’ve taken at least a *little* damage, but there wasn’t a scratch on him. The only thing I’d managed to do was get his clothes dirty.

Ugh, this blows. Then again, I’d already used a magical land mine in an earlier match. Made sense that it wouldn’t work so well a second time.

“No, you moron. That was just my way of saying hello. Can’t you even figure that out?”

“Hmph. You snap at me like a rabid, starving wolf. Clearly, Fynar is incapable of training his underlings properly. In any case, you slaughtered a great deal of my people. Isn’t that right, Vizard?”

Wait, he knows? The Demon King and his people should have been in full control of information about the operation I’d been conducting with them in the demon world’s capital. If I’d been exposed, was it because of fiends who’d made their move a little while ago? I’d fully intended to have the dickheads who’d attacked Nell be reborn as fertilizer, but maybe I’d overlooked one that’d somehow managed to slip away and survive. Or had other fiends found their comrades’ corpses and discovered some sort of evidence tied to me?

Whatever. It didn’t matter. Wasn’t like I planned on hiding the fact that I’d killed them.

“I sure did. And let me tell ya, man, your dude just would *not* shut up. He told me aaall kinds of things. Who orchestrated the attack against the winged’s settlement and why, what you’ve got cooking up from here on out... Lotsa stuff.”

Grinning evilly under my mask, I drew En from her scabbard, revealing her blade in all its glory. The truth was that the enemy commanding officer I’d interrogated had been surprisingly tight-lipped. But he definitely hadn’t wanted to witness his worst nightmares for a second time, so when I’d taken out a second dagger infused with the Nightmare circuit, he’d spilled his guts. He’d very graciously taught me a few things. After that... Well, let’s just say he was then reincarnated as a part of the earth.

The ginger bastard apparently found my words displeasing, if the slight twitch in his expression was any indication.

“Whoa, hey, what’s this? Did I touch a nerve? You sure aren’t looking so full of yourself anymore. Guessing you’re not a fan of your supersecret info being leaked, huh? You need to do a better job of hiring people, ya ding-dong.”

“Well, shall I thank you for your advi— Nh!”

He was in the middle of his sentence, but I didn’t give a rat’s ass about what came out of his mouth. I cut him off by rushing within arm’s reach and swinging En down from above. Damn near got the ginger bastard in the face too, but too bad for me, he nimbly sidestepped it. I found his agile movements completely at odds with the fact he was built like a freaking semitruck. Taking a huge jump backward, he faced me once more.

“You insolent swine. Can you not even let others finish what they have to say?”

Veins bulged in the ginger bastard’s face and the corners of his eyelids slanted sharply. Even so, he kept his composure as he spoke to me.

“My bad. What can I say except that I’m just a self-centered kinda guy? I’m not all that sophisticated or good with social conventions, y’know?”

“Good grief. You and Fynar are cut from the same unpleasant cloth. So be it. Since you insist on fighting me, I’ll grant your wish.”

The ginger bastard smiled ferociously at me before suddenly stretching one arm out to the side, his hand open wide. He began gathering magic in the center of his palm, the particles of magic steadily morphing until they finally took the form of a greatsword. Its blade was as big as a person and black as darkness. Dark red, veinlike patterns coursed through it giving it a particularly sinister appearance.

As far as its actual shape went, it looked a lot like my old greatsword, Hasai. And I hated to admit it, but this thing looked way

out of Hasai's league. I was almost positive its performance would be dramatically higher than my old weapon's. There was one more thing about his greatsword too.

"A cursed magic blade, eh?"

Name: Totund Ruin

Race: Magic Blade

Quality: Indeterminable

Power: 1,644

Stamina: 1,330

Harnessed Magic: 2,428

Special Abilities: Telepathy, ???, ???

Abilities: Self-Repair 6, ???, ???, ???

Titles: Intelligent Weapon, Bringer of Death,
Bringer of Destruction, ???

A calamitous blade that brings about death and destruction. No hope resides within it; only despair. Whoever wields it shall never again find rest in this world, forever doomed to live in strife. Increases the user's stats remarkably at the cost of eroding their very existence.

An ominous magical energy emanated from his greatsword, similar to the aura En used to have. A cursed magic blade indeed, and an extraordinarily dangerous one at that. As for its abilities... *Shit. It's way stronger than En.*

I couldn't see all of its skills or titles for whatever reason, but its description and stats were more than enough to tell me it was a seriously brutal weapon. *Crap, this is bad.* In light of its apparently absurd capabilities, the ginger bastard who held it didn't look crazy at all. In other words, he had the sword under his complete control because he'd made it surrender to his will, forcing it to acknowledge him as its master.

The ginger bastard held his greatsword's hilt with just one hand. Taking up a fighting stance, he sneered at me.

"Well done. You are correct. My weapon has a consciousness. Even now, it annoys me with its constant cries of, 'Give me blood. Give me blood. Give me blood.' And who am I to deny its demands?!"
"Shit!"

A sharp rush followed his last word. He'd shortened the distance between us before I could even blink and used his forceful momentum to slash his greatsword sideways. It sliced through the air toward me. I moved as well, though, swinging En just in time for her blade to meet

his, intercepting his attack.

At long last, power clashed against power. The shrill sound of swords clanging reverberated explosively through the air. I felt an impact like I'd been hit head-on by a truck in my arms. The shock wave traveled throughout my entire body, all the way down to my feet and into the arena floor itself. Such massive power created an intense blast of air that swept over us, fluttering both of our clothes.

And then, we repelled each other simultaneously. *If this asshole wants a battle of strength, I'll gladly give it to him!* Ever since I'd murdered the crap out of that shit-ass dragon and achieved my current stats, the only ones who were on my level or stronger than me were some monsters in the Demonic Forest and Lefi. Among my values, there was no denying that Strength wasn't very high, but even so, it wasn't low either when compared to everyone else's I'd seen so far. At least it shouldn't have been.

I wasn't conceited enough to think my true capabilities were the best of the best, but I'd never once considered the possibility of a direct power struggle on equal footing like this. Even that old butler, the master swordsman, hadn't tried to go up against me directly.

What made the ginger bastard different, then? Was his greatsword enhancing his abilities that much? Were his stats just inherently high? *Probably both, huh?*

"So you wish to battle me on power, do you?! I applaud your grit, Vizard!"

Welp, it looked like we were on the same wavelength. Bellowing fiercely, my opponent spun around after our initial clash worked to repel us both. He recovered his stance and slashed at me again with his greatsword, coming at me diagonally from above this time.

Jeez, that's heavy. I blocked his blade with En again, though the impact still rocked through my arms, rattling my bones. But it wasn't so bad that I couldn't take it. The damn dragon's assaults had been a lot heftier than this ginger bastard's.

I dropped my hips and held my ground on the spot. Then, I tightened my grip on En's hilt after her blade had been pushed back by his. Putting all my momentum into my next swing, I slashed up at him from below.

Once more, there was a clash of two powers. And once more, we both repelled each other. But neither of us refused to give in. Again and again, we went at each other head-to-head. Our relentlessly crossing swords collided with each other in a long rally of blows.



I had a feeling that this asshole and I were thinking the same thing right now. *Defeat my opponent with my own power.* We battled each other in the center of the arena, showered by the spectators' frenzied cheers. Our stubborn clash continued without end as each of us relentlessly tried to crush the other.

In the midst of our fight, I tried a bunch of times to break through the impasse by using magic. For some unknown reason, though, my magic wouldn't activate. The moment I worked up my magical energy to launch a magical attack, every last bit of it would vanish like mist. And it wasn't just that. I also found that I couldn't properly manipulate my magic at all anymore.

Could it be because of his abilities? That would've explained why I couldn't use Analysis on him either. Why the magical land mine hadn't done any damage despite going off too. It made the fact that I *could* Analyze his weapon at least a little bit all the more puzzling, though. *Argh, thinking about it isn't helping me solve the problem even a little bit!*

"You can't use it, can you? Your magic."

The ginger bastard taunted me with a nasty smile on his face. I scoffed back at him.

"Eat a dick. I can kick your ass without magic!"

It is what it is. If this was how I had to fight, so be it. Besides, just because he *thought* he had the advantage right now didn't mean that was true. Bearing in mind the fact that he hadn't used magic at all either, it was extremely likely that he was also bound by the magic-negation effect.

There was something else too. A single glance at him told its own story. See, the ginger bastard was bleeding from places I hadn't targeted in my attacks. Granted, it wasn't a lot of blood, but he was most definitely bleeding. Probably some sort of constraints related to using that disturbing weapon. I mean, a cursed magic blade *had* to have at least one curse on it, right?

He continued forcing his body to go above and beyond as he vied for power supremacy against me. But I had the upper hand. The only thing left was for me to do everything I could.

"Take that!"

"Ngh!"

The moment my balls-to-the-wall swing crashed into his all-out slash, I remembered the technique the old master swordsman had used in our fight. I shifted the point of impact ever so slightly, forcing the ginger bastard's greatsword to slide.

"Wha—"

The redheaded scumbag lost his balance just a bit. And thus, my

chance was born. *Let's do this.* I lunged and stabbed him in the shoulder, creating a massive, gaping hole in his flesh.

“Gaaahhh!”

My plan had been to cut his arm off completely, but I'd failed. Even so, he howled like a feral beast. Yet he paid no attention at all to the blood gushing from his wound and instead punched me hard in the stomach, drilling me right in the solar plexus. *I wonder what kind of workout he does.* As that angry, idle thought flashed through my mind, my body blasted backward from the impact.

His punch momentarily stopped my breathing. I could taste the sourness in the back of my throat as my stomach acid surged upward. The nausea made me want to blow chunks everywhere. But he should have taken a lot more damage than me. I was in pain, true, but pain was all it was. I definitely wouldn't let it be any sort of obstacle in my path to victory.

“Keh keh... Bliss. This moment is utter bliss. No thoughts muddling the brain, just obeying the body's desire to fight. This is what it means to be alive.”

The ginger bastard's snakelike lips twisted into a wide grin that showed that he was sincerely enjoying this. He carried his greatsword on the shoulder with the hole in it, acting like he wasn't injured at all. Blood continued pulsing from the wound nonetheless, though, staining his clothes and splashing onto the ground.

“I must admit that I've found life somewhat dull recently because everyone around me keeps telling me not to make any moves myself. Needless to say, it's the first time in a long time that I've felt my blood sing in a fight. You have my thanks, Vizard.”

“Well, I'm glad *you're* having fun, 'cause I sure as shit ain't. So you can take your thanks and shove it where the sun don't shine. En, you okay?”

“Yes...I'm fine. I won't lose to that sword.”

I'd asked her that because, considering how many times she'd clashed against his sword, I was a bit worried. Unusually for my sword girl, though, her telepathic response conveyed intense fighting spirit. Her fiery words told me in no uncertain terms that she intended to win.

“Heh heh. I guessed correctly after all. Your weapon is also a cursed-type, isn't it?”

“Cursed? Don't you *ever* talk about my kid like that, you piece of shit. She's *nothing* like the evil thing in your hand!”

“Oh? Then let's amuse ourselves by testing which one of our magic blades is the superi— Tch.”

Grinning savagely like a wild animal, the ginger bastard raised his greatsword, ready to go at it again. But then, for some unfathomable

reason, an intensely cold expression replaced his brutal smile and he lowered his sword.

“Now! Go, go, go!”

That shout was followed by a large number of the venue’s security staff rushing the arena. *Who’s leading the charge, though? Ah, the attendant who was standing next to the redheaded asshole throughout the entire tournament.* Dozens of security guards stuck themselves between me and the ginger bastard, building a thick human wall. Then, only against me did they raise oblong shields like the ones cops used when putting down rioters and insurgents. They did this so I wouldn’t be able to move.

“Yo?! What the hell?!”

I resisted the security personnel swarming me. I kicked, punched, and used all my energy to force a path open, but despite me knocking them away, they always trudged back to continue their impromptu siege of me. Because they were so frantic in stopping me, I made no progress whatsoever. I couldn’t fly my way out either since a few of their people circled the air above, effectively creating a defensive net. Even if I killed all of them, it would still be impossible to break through.

Should I, though? Should I kill them all? No. Nope, bad idea. They had nothing to do with my beef with the ginger bastard, so I didn’t want to defile En’s blade by cutting them, much less making her kill them. I was in a pickle. It was perfectly reasonable for me to ask “Now what?” in this situation since killing them was off the table. Monsters and enemies who straight-up wanted to take me out? Sure, no problem. But these security guards had no intention of killing me. They just wanted to stop me. I couldn’t kill them for doing their jobs, and I couldn’t make my girl kill them for it either.

What about my magic? Shit! It still won’t activate!

“Goddammit! Hey, numbnuts! You chickening out on me?!”

“Hmph, it’s not as if we can even swing our swords in these conditions. You have no need to worry, though. It won’t be long before you and I decisively settle our battle.”

The redheaded dickwad grinned at me, flashing his fangs. In a process opposite from the moment he’d made his greatsword appear, he now made it disappear. It practically dissolved into the air itself. After that, he turned away from me and walked toward the arena’s exit.

“My lord! Are you hurt?!”

“This barely counts as a flesh wound. That aside, you have quite the gall to interfere in my fight.”

“I offer my deepest apologies and accept any punishment you choose to mete out! Something you are able to do, my lord, because

you are still alive. Moreover, you would have soon reached your limit. I won't allow you to forget how dangerous it is for you to fight for an extended period of time with that greatsword!"

"Hmph. I don't appreciate your impertinence. Anyhow, I trust you can handle the aftermath here?"

"Yes, my lord. Leave it to me."

If only this was my dungeon's territory!

"Shit! Hey, wait! Fight me, asshole! *Fight me!*"

But the ginger bastard completely ignored my shouts as he and his flunky walked out of the arena, vanishing behind the scenes.



"Then, right now, Ser Nell is..."

I nodded in response to the old guy wearing a butler's uniform.

"Safe, yeah. She got caught up in a bad fight, so I evacuated her to my place. Sorry about that."

"No, it's fine. The most important thing is her safety. Is your home near here?"

"Uh, not really. I can guarantee you it's safe, but it's definitely not close by. It's actually pretty far."

"In short, you used some sort of space-time magic to relocate her?"

"Yeah, you can think of it like that."

My reply came with a shrug. The two of us were currently in that tavern from a while back. The place was practically deserted right now, but that was probably because it was off-peak hours. Aside from a handful of other folks, the only people here were me, the master swordsman, Leila, and En. Leigeghegg, the demon world's capital, was still in a festival-y mood, but in here, it was super quiet. If you didn't know better, you'd have no idea there was a celebration going on just outside.

After our little scuffle in the arena, the goddamn head of the fiends disappeared from the stadium and I ended up disqualified from the tournament. This was my just deserts, even if I wasn't particularly happy about it. I mean, I'd challenged a VIP to a fight, for frick's sake. *I bet the final round's happening right about now.*

Now that I had hindsight and was thinking with a cool head, I was forced to acknowledge that it would've been difficult if not straight-up impossible to kill him right then and there. Unable to use my magic, the fight would have dragged on needlessly. Plus, the ginger bastard was an important figure in the demon world. Even though he'd been coerced into battle by the audience's thunderous cheers, someone definitely would've found a way to intervene had his life actually been put in jeopardy. *Satan forbid anyone gave a damn that the dude himself*

had wanted to keep fighting.

In any case, I couldn't help feeling like I could've figured out *some* way to force the situation in my favor. I had enough self-awareness to admit that my mind had been overtaken by rage after seeing what a mess they'd made of Nell, but if I'd been thinking straight, I could've, say, used Ruler's Might like I had in the preliminary. The ability interfered with an opponent's magical energy instead of the user's, so it just might've worked. Or maybe not, actually. It relied on the user's magic to activate and I hadn't been able to manipulate mine properly during our fight. *That redheaded waste of goddamn space.*

"Is that so? Well, I'm certainly glad you were there in her hour of need. Despite knowing of her suffering, I couldn't do anything to alleviate it..."

The old butler's forehead furrowed in regret, his wrinkles deepening as he murmured to me.

"Nah, man, you can't blame yourself. The timing just sucked," I consoled him as I grimaced.

Yup, the timing had absolutely been horrendous. Just like me, this old man's primary goal in the tournament had been to stand out, so he'd acted accordingly to draw the enemy's attention to him. While they were focused on the astounding human contestant, the hero could work behind the scenes to gather as many allies as possible.

Except things had gone sideways all at once. Not only had he and I gotten matched up against each other in a fight, trouble had found Nell and the others at the exact same time. This, of course, meant their plan wouldn't progress quite like they'd hoped. I didn't know all the details about said trouble since I hadn't been directly involved, but according to the black-clad bastard who'd been so kind as to tell me pretty much everything, it seemed to have happened completely by accident.

As he'd explained it, he and his underlings hadn't known that Nell and her friends would be there. When their turncoats within the demon clan had contacted them about preparations being complete for the insurrection, the enemy commander and his forces had gone to raid the winged's town. What they'd found when they'd arrived, though, was Nell and company's dogged resistance. For both her group and the fiends' special forces, the other side's presence had been a bolt from the blue.

The reason they'd attacked the winged was simple: since the clan had a ton of strength and influence—more than enough to justify disobeying them—they would crush the winged before they could ally with the enemy. Basically, it was a precautionary measure by the fiends. They made moves to turn a few of the winged against their own people, and once they'd created a faction within the tribe that

would fall in line with them, the bastards planned on allowing said faction to rule over the winged. That was supposed to have happened after they'd exterminated the most vocal and powerful winged in opposition, buuuut that strategy had failed miserably.

In a small way, they'd gotten a win by reducing the winged's power with the infighting they'd caused. In all the ways that mattered, though, they'd lost. One, Nell had taken out a shitload of their men, and two, I'd finished what she started by annihilating the leftovers. The venture had ended up costing them a whole hell of a lot more than they'd achieved.

By the way, if you were wondering about the surviving members of the winged clan, they were currently under the protection of the Demon King and had completely converted to his side. Needless to say, they'd thrown their power a million percent behind the anti-fiend faction. I'd had a very brief window of time to check out the winged's stats during my rushed talk with Ronia, but it'd been enough to tell me that the winged folks' stats were fundamentally very high. If I knew the Demon King, and I sure freaking did, odds were good that he was overjoyed at having them on his side so that he could push them arou—uh, I mean, ask them for their help.

"So what're you peeps gonna do now?"

"A good question. I'll be staying in the demon world, as will two of my friends who have been working under assumed identities here for quite a long time. Miss Mekina and Miss Ronia, however, will briefly return to their respective nations to make their reports. I suspect they may have already embarked on their journeys home because they asked me to thank you."

Whoa, Nell has friends besides Ronia?

"Huh, okay. Well, tell them I said hi if you see them again."

"Heh, indeed I shall. Master Yuki, I'd like to convey my own gratitude for your assistance on this occasion. As old as these bones are, I would gladly give my life, such as it is, for your sake."

The elderly butler's expression underwent a huge change as he bowed his head, transforming him from a friendly old man into an earnest one.

"Seriously, don't even worry about it. I only did what I did for selfish reasons. Had nothing to do with you, so relax."

"Regardless, I stand by my pledge. You protected what I should have, what was *my* duty to protect. I must thank you appropriately and return the favor accordingly or my conscience won't let me rest."

The old guy clearly wasn't gonna back down on this, so I reflected on his request in silence before giving him a thoughtful reply.

"All right, old man, have it your way. How about this: next time you're free, why don't you teach me how to use a sword?"

“Teach you...how to use a sword?”

“Yeah, because I can’t for the life of me get the hang of it. My Dexterity value is high, but no matter how much time passes or how hard I work, I just suck ass at using a sword. We’ll probably be heading home soon, but I’m pretty sure we’ll see each other again since you’re friends with Nell.”

“Hmm... Well, a stat value is only a reference, you see; the meaning of it will vary depending on an individual’s strengths and weaknesses. Regardless, I accept your request. Allow this old man to teach you his techniques when next we cross paths.”

“Awesome, you’re a lifesaver. Especially ’cause I really wanna get better at wielding this kiddo.”

So saying, I gently patted En’s head. She sat on my lap, happily stuffing her adorable face with meat.

“I must admit, I still find myself surprised by that little lady. To think this is your weapon’s avatar.”

“Hmm...? Well, I don’t mind giving you a piece.”

En abruptly realized that the elderly butler was staring at her. I wasn’t even sure how she’d misunderstood what he’d said. Maybe she’d been so focused on eating that she hadn’t heard a word of our conversation? In any case, with those words, she picked up a piece of meat and offered it to him.

“Ha ha! No, no, don’t worry about me. That’s for you to enjoy, so please eat up.”

“En, it’s rather impolite to share your food like that. Let’s work on our manners, hm?”

“Okay...”

Leila gently chided En as she thrust her fork with the meat on it toward him. She nodded obediently and carried the bite to her own mouth. The old man’s delighted smile told me how charmed he was by my little girl as he watched her.

After my discussion with the butler, I made my way to the throne room of the demon world’s castle. Since the castle guards knew my face pretty well by now, I effectively had a free pass to go in and out.

“I’m sorry for doing what I did without consulting you first. And for getting disqualified on top of it.”

“No, no, I’m *not* concerned at all. In *fact*, it’s become *much* easier for me to maneuver *precisely* due to your actions as of late. Now, I can make *my* moves without reserve. As an *ally*, you’ve gone *above* and *beyond* my expectations.”

I found myself laughing wryly at the Demon King as he spoke, his usual shady smile—the one that hid his true, innermost thoughts and feelings—on his face. Clearly, he’d been going full steam ahead on his

behind-the-scenes work without letting me in on it. Which was fair; he'd involved me in several enemy base destruction strategies since I'd gotten to the demon world capital, but it made total sense for him to have other schemes in play too. For example, ways to get fiends or their supporters to double-cross their faction and methods for creating internal rifts within the enemy ranks. Whatever the case, I wasn't mad, because he was doing the best he could in his own way.

It would probably be a walk in the park for Fynar to have his people infiltrate the fiends. I mean, all someone needed to do to join their cause was declare themselves a fiend, so it didn't seem all that difficult to come up with a tactic to slip someone inside. But that was just my opinion based on his comment. If this hyperintelligent Blackheart said things were easier for him now, who was I to argue?

I would've bet good DP that he'd had a great time executing whatever plans he so chose while the enemy had spent the entire tournament focused on eliminating me. And while neither of us could deny that Fynar's side was still at a disadvantage in terms of influence, it was clear from the cheerful way he spoke that the seeds that would turn the tide in his favor had been planted.

"Oh, hey, whatever happened to those three?"

By "those three," I meant the Dwarf King, Elf Queen, and Beast Lord. Since I'd been so busy lately, I hadn't seen any of them since The Four Races Alliance Summit. Naturally, I was curious if they were still in the demon world's capital.

"In order to *strengthen* our alliance, they've been in *meetings* with the good boys and girls on *my* side for *several* days now, discussing matters such as *economic* cooperation and the like between our *various* races. All of them have been *hard* at work today, but I *believe* they should be *just* about done soon."

The Demon King looked toward the massive door of the throne room, which just so happened to open with a heavy creak right as he finished talking. And speak of the demon, those same three entered.

"Demon lord! Dinna tell me yer leavin' us already?!"

"We watched your match, demon lord. Ya gave 'em what for."

"I have to agree. It was quite the tantalizing battle, Lord Yuki. That aside, I do so wish you'd stay, as I'd love to deepen our bond even further."

I couldn't help but be startled by them showing up, and my surprise was clear when I spoke.

"Whoa, you all came to see me off?"

"Course we did, laddie! We're friends now, are we na? A man's gotta see his friends off when it be time fer them ta go home."

"It is as he says, Lord Yuki. I have a bone to pick you with on that front as well. Had you not been so reserved in your attitude and told

us sooner, we would have prepared you a grand send-off.”

“Uhhh, I appreciate the thought, but that’s not really necessary...”

I replied to the Elf Queen with a rueful smile while listening to the Beast Lord talk to En.

“Zaien. My home is always open to ya, so me an mine’ll be waitin’, yeah? We’ll make sure to feed ya the best meat, which is our local specialty. Ya can play with my daughter too.”

“Okay... I’m very excited. I can’t wait to see you again.”

After patting her head cheerfully, the Beast Lord turned to me.

“There ya have it, demon lord. I expect ya to visit us soon. Our celebrations might not be up to snuff, leastways compared to them elves, but I can guarantee ya the grandest of welcomes.”

“Ha ha. Yeah? Then En and I will hold you to that when we drop by.”

I grinned at the Beast Lord before turning to face the Demon King again.

“Oh, right, Fynar, I wanted to ask. Are you sure about giving me that much for my reward? ’Cause it’s a *ton* more than we initially agreed on—which I appreciate, mind you, but still.”

The terms “gold mine” and “treasure trove” described what he’d given me pretty much perfectly. When Haloria had led me to the room holding my compensation, I’d unthinkingly blurted out, “Wait, what? Is this a treasure room or something?”

“You worked *more* than enough, so I deem that amount *quite* appropriate. *Especially* in light of the fact that I’d planned *only* on having you participate in the *tournament*. You did much, *much* more than that, and your *efforts* deserve just remuneration. Besides, you *will* be coming here again, *yes?*”

“Damn skippy. You *know* I’m pissed about how shit went down.”

Because that ginger bastard is unmistakably my enemy now. I’d done everything asked of me this time around, but I felt like I’d spent too long here. I wanted to go home because, obviously, I was worried about everyone back in the dungeon. Even so, I had a score to settle. *And I sure as shit will.* There was no way I could leave things as half-assed as they were.

“*Excellent.* Then I’d like to commission you again on your *next* visit. Considering that *this* occasion showed just how *generous* I am, I’m *sure* you’d be willing to work with me once *more*, *yes?*”

“Yeah, yeah. Count me in, you damn Blackheart.”

I rolled my eyes while smirking at him. In turn, the Demon King shrugged and gave me a grin of his own.

“I would *prefer* it if you *praised* my profound ingenuity instead of *damning* it. *Well*, then, Yuki, ladies. Until we meet *again*, hm?”

“Yup. Catch you on the flip side. And I’ll be visiting you three

soon enough too, so be ready.”

“I’ll be lookin’ forward to it, laddie!”

“You’re free to stop by anytime, mate.”

“I concur. I eagerly await your visit.”

After I said my goodbyes to each of them, I finally turned toward one of the Demon King’s subordinates who’d been waiting patiently off to the side. It was Haloria, of course, who’d taken care of us during our entire stay in the demon world.

“Haloria, thank you for everything you did for us. I really appreciate it.”

“I’m truly grateful for your hospitality as well, Haloria. Be well. I expect you’ll keep working hard, hm?”

“Bye-bye...”

“I humbly accept your thanks and am glad to have been able to assist you. Lord Yuki, Lady En, Lei—hrk. *Lady* Leila.”

Haloria sounded like she was on the verge of tears, which we couldn’t help smiling at. Then, watched over warmly by everyone in the throne room, the three of us activated our teleportation necklaces to return to the dungeon. The stunned expressions on their faces right before we disappeared from sight were priceless.

I bet they thought we’d take a carriage like normal people. Feeling a sense of accomplishment at pulling off my little prank, I left the demon world with Leila and En.

Side Story 3: The Villains' Conference

Chaos reigned over the conference.

"You're violating the terms of our agreement!"

The young winged man slammed his fist down on the table as if he wanted to smash it. Because of the structure of their heads, it was difficult for the winged to display their emotions. In this instance, however, the depths of his rage warped his face, making it easy to discern.

"*You* were the ones who declared that you would silence the doddering fools leading our clan! But you blundered majorly, which resulted in most of the survivors now being squarely on the enemy's side! Our agreement stipulated that I be made the head of the winged for fulfilling my end of the bargain! I did *not* agree to be your paper tiger!"

"Hmph. You're not only the one who thinks the contract has been violated."

"What?! You dare accuse *us* of treachery?!"

"The only information you provided us about the personnel in your settlement was the numbers of your warriors and that they had three feeble human allies. So you can imagine our shock when one of those three humans wound up being a hero, of all things—something we could never have foreseen. Thanks to *your* information, we suffered enormous losses in our pursuit of them, followed shortly thereafter by the infernal masked man's assistance. Altogether, more than half of my subordinates died in that mess."

The black-clad man laughed scornfully at the winged youth. Though his response had been relatively cold and measured, his eyes blazed with violent emotion. *My men died because of your piss-poor intel.* His savage expression eloquently conveyed that thought without him having to voice it.

"Place the blame for that on your subordinates' weakness, not me!"

"Cease your yapping, you unlearned brat. You're incapable of seeing the true nature of things. Blind as a bat, you are."

"To hell with you!"

The winged young man stood up in a rush, knocking over his chair in his indignation.

“This is why I can’t deal with imbeciles...”

The black-clad man sneered derisively at him.

“Enough, both of you! You’re in the presence of our lord!”

Derwes, the adjutant to Gozim, the leader of the fiends, put a halt to the tension before it exploded out of control. At his sharp, angry exclamation, the black-clad man quickly bowed his head. After a moment of hesitation, the winged youth, his face twisted in frustration, grudgingly righted his overturned chair and sat on it once more.

“Let’s return to the debriefing. Naguut, you say it’ll be impossible for you and your people to act in the near future?”

“Yes. We expended a bit too much of our manpower. At present, my subordinates are unable to participate in any of our operations. The most they can do in the interim is gather information. Even the test subjects you so generously provided for the siege of the Demon King’s castle ended up wasted when that strategy failed.”

The man called Naguut exhaled quietly.

“I don’t particularly care about those since we were going to dispose of them anyway. Regardless, I didn’t expect them to cause such a trivial amount of damage. I’m assuming we can thank the masked man’s interference for that outcome as well...”

Having said his piece, Derwes glanced obliquely at an empty seat in the room. It had remained vacant since that strategy was enacted, after which the man to whom it belonged failed to return. Originally one of Naguut’s subordinates, he had been allowed to occupy the seat whenever the leaders gathered, and the raid on the demon world’s castle had been entrusted to him because the top brass acknowledged his talents and dependability.

In spite of that, he wasn’t here, meaning he’d been either killed or seized. No, it was most certainly the latter. The high failure rate of their recent operations proved as much. His capture might very well have been the most painful blow they’d suffered in the past few years, as his loyalty to the cause had been wholly genuine. But Derwes doubted he would have been able to withstand the ministrations of the demon world’s finest mind, the Demon King. It was said that the Demon King was peerless when it came to scheming, so it was quite likely that he’d extracted information from the man through his various wiles.

As soon as they’d realized that their information had been compromised, the fiends had moved the locations of a few of their bases and implemented changes to ongoing operations. It had been impossible to defend against all of the Demon King’s attacks, however. Consequently, they had incurred tremendous losses. It felt like having an existing wound relentlessly, continuously torn further open by the

sharpest of knives.

“And what of the hero?”

“We didn’t find her corpse, so she must have managed to escape. It’s probable that the masked man took her to safety.”

“...I have one question.”

An individual covered from head to toe in black armor uttered those words softly. Arms folded, they had remained silent throughout the conference—until now. Their helm muffled their voice, making it impossible to discern their gender.

“This masked man, is he truly that strong?”

“Ah, right, you have yet to encounter him since you were stationed elsewhere. Well, on top of being completely undaunted by the test subjects, he annihilated more than half of Naguut’s subordinates, which comprise the vast majority of our active operating unit. To add insult to injury, he directly challenged Lord Gozim and battled him head-on. At the very least, he’s powerful enough to not lose to a stronger opponent. A considerable threat, I’d say.”

“Heh heh, I see. So he’s strong, eh?”

At Derwes’s answer, a soft chuckle came from behind the helm.

“You never change, do you?” Smiling wryly, Derwes now directed his attention to another person at the table. “Has the investigation team determined the masked man’s identity?”

“We’ve narrowed the list of candidates down to a few possibilities but have yet to identify him. Though I’m loath to admit it, unlike Fynar, we unfortunately lack someone with a high Analysis level.”

“Hmm... Expand on these candidates, then.”

“Runougil, a Silent Assassin and part of Demon King Fynar’s clandestine unit. Shanadia, a demi-human who is an expert at elven swordsmanship and Fynar’s ally. Junaidel, a Dragonewt warrior and member of the demon species who joined hands with Fynar. Lastly, Yuki, the demon lord of a labyrinth. These are all the names that remain on our list.”

But we have no decisive proof. The investigator left that part unsaid and stopped speaking.

“Yes, I can see why you’ve selected them, as each is talented in his own right. Yet that masked man’s fighting style is extremely distinct in a way that is quite disparate from theirs... Wait, repeat that last name.”

“Demon Lord Yuki. He obstructed our operations in the human country of Alisia. We included him as a person of interest because, in his time there, he fought using a long-bladed sword while wearing a mask. The chances of him being the same antagonist we face now are low, however.”

“Why? Based on what you’ve told me, shouldn’t he be the *most*

likely suspect?"

"Well, for one, he's the master of a labyrinth. Secondly, said labyrinth is located deep within the Demonic Forest, or so our investigation found."

"Mm... The same territory the black dragon was foolish enough to enter without permission, where he promptly found himself slain by the legendary Supreme Dragon?"

Derwes spat those words, his expression disgusted.

"Correct. That region is extremely harsh even without the added danger of the Supreme Dragon. The monsters there are two to three times more powerful than those in other areas. On multiple occasions, I sent a number of my best people to survey it, but not a single one returned. Therefore, taking into account the inherent danger of the area as well as the existence of his dungeon core, which essentially serves as his heart, we deemed it unlikely that he would venture so far from his domain."

"Despite his trip to the human kingdom's capital?"

"Consider the distances involved, sir. It would take no more than a few hours to travel to Alisia from his dungeon. But it takes several *days* to come here to the demon world. Moreover, he would have to be in residence for quite a while to participate in the tournament."

"Yes, you have a point. I find it difficult to believe that the lord of a labyrinth would leave his dungeon core unattended for such an extended period of time. Understood. I surmise that the masked man will continue to pose a threat to us, so he warrants further investi—"

"No. Forget him."

The fiends' leader, Gozim, cut Derwes off. Seated at the head of the table, he had said nothing while the conference took place. Instead, he'd watched and listened, his chin resting in his hand and his elbow braced against an armrest.

Gozim recalled Demon King Fynar's criticism of his subordinates as all being "yes-men." While it was true that his people hardly ever contradicted his opinions, Fynar's underlying assumption for his censure was based on a faulty premise. He, the head of the fiends, did little to nothing. He only acted when he thought it necessary—for example, his decision to step into the limelight for the tournament. Otherwise, he left essentially everything in the hands of his subordinates.

Why? Because he knew that the only thing he excelled at was fighting. He understood that it was his duty to be the standard-bearer for their cause and recognized that all other tasks would be handled much better by his people. Ergo, he simply sat and awaited the results of his subordinates' efforts while assuming responsibility for everything as the faction head. In terms of charisma, Gozim was most

definitely qualified to be their leader.

“What? I-I mean, are you certain, my lord?”

“He’s vanished, hasn’t he? We have other things to take care of rather than rooting out the vizard. Besides, I have no doubt he’ll show himself when the time comes. To kill me, naturally. So leave him be until then.”

“Understood. Is there anything else on your mind?”

“Hmm... Just one thing, and I want you to heed me well. We’re being overwhelmed right now.”

Gozim, the leader of fiends, continued.

“The tournament deviated tremendously from what we originally planned and Fynar’s latest attacks have destroyed nearly all of our most vital bases. This means our primary operation will need to be revised as well. But none of that matters.”

Everyone in attendance remained silent, directing their full attention to him.

“We only do what needs to be done to uphold our cause. We pledge our might and our valor for the sake of our principles.”

Gozim never raised his voice, but the weight of his words conveyed his zeal. They eddied around the room, compelling an equal measure of subdued enthusiasm in the others.

“We carry the wishes of our fallen brethren and we *will* see our path to its end. Everything for the sake of our ambition.”

“For the sake of our ambition!” his followers echoed in unison. And so, they wielded their power for a single purpose.

Chapter 4: Nell and Yuki

It was a strange sensation, as if my body was being dismantled atom by atom and then reassembled once more. For just a few seconds, I couldn't see anything at all. But it didn't take long for my eyesight to come back, putting everything around me in sharp focus. By the time my consciousness fully returned to me, I'd already left the demon world behind and was standing in the dungeon's real throne room.

"Yooo, we're hooo—"

"Everyone, we've returned. Oh my..."

The first thing that entered my field of vision was the half-naked hero. Cheeks flaming scarlet and movements frozen as if time itself had stopped, she stared at us, stunned by our sudden appearance.

Uhhh, I guess she was in the middle of changing. On her lower half, she wore what appeared to be Lew's pajama bottoms, while her upper half remained bare, her chest covered only by one of her arms. The dungeon's lighting illuminated her smooth, sunburned skin.

She didn't say a word. Neither did I.

Shit, I have to say something. I needed to cut through the awkwardness with something sensible, so I urgently forced my brain to start working again after it temporarily went into shutdown mode at the sight of her. After a few moments of opening and closing my mouth like a goldfish, I somehow managed to think of something to say that would break the impasse.

"You're surprisingly grown-up, huh?"

"Hngh! Perish, Demon Lord!"

Without even asking what I meant by that because she understood right away, Nell angrily swung her fist and walloped me square in the face.

"Gbwrrr!"

That stupid sound came out of my mouth as the hero's punch sent me flying backward at top speed. Crashing into the dungeon's wall mercifully put an end to my little trip.

Damn... I totally...said the wrong thing...didn't I...?

"Now, then, Yuki. Do you know why you are being forced to kneel?"

I sat seiza-style on the floor of the real throne room, my cheek red

and swollen. Lefi loomed over me, arms folded, as she struck an aggressive pose. Next to her stood Iluna, copying her stance, and on her other side was the young hero, Nell, who was glaring a little at me with her face still kinda flushed.

“Uhhh... Ummm... Might it perchance be related to the young lady over there staring daggers at me?”

“Oho. I see you are at least self-aware enough to comprehend your transgression. Then pray elaborate on *why* specifically you are being forced to kneel in relation to this hero?”

“Mayhap it has something to do with laying my eyes upon Lady Hero’s state of dishabille earlier?”

“Urk... Mr. Yuki, you’re the worst! How can you be so abominably insensitive?! Even if it was an accident, you should—”

“No, I am certain you are mistaken on that last part.”

“—definitely be more delicate with your phras— Huh? What do you mean?”

Hearing Lefi’s unexpected denial, Nell stared at my beloved wife in confusion.

“Good grief, Yuki, you have brought yet another woman into our dungeon! And let me tell you, I have heard plenty from En and Leila about your behavior in the demon world! Fawned over constantly by a bevy of women without once rejecting them, you philanderer! You are fundamentally much too soft when it comes to the fairer sex!”

“Aha! Exactly! She’s right, Mr. Yuki! You really shouldn’t flirt so mu— Wait, hold on. Lefi, don’t tell me you’re including *me* in that ‘bevy of women’ who tried to seduce him. Because it sounds an awful lot like you are.”

Nell did another shocked double take at my wife’s words and tone. *Dang, this girl is a freakin’ hoot. I can’t get enough of her.*

“Why are you smiling, Yuki?! It does not seem to me as if you are truly repenting for your misdeeds!”

“No, no, I am most certainly reflecting on my behavior, my lady. I offer you my humblest apologies for giving you an impression otherwise. But if I may be allowed to say one thing in my defense, I personally don’t recall being as easygoing as you think I am with women.”

“Gah! You shameless scoundrel! So be it! En!”

“I’m here...”

En stepped forward from her spot behind Lefi. The look in her eyes felt vaguely accusatory. My little girl wasn’t usually all that expressive, but I could proudly state that I’d gotten damn good at distinguishing her emotions.

“Master...the cat lady and the demon lady with big boobies were all over you and you liked it.”

A demon lady with big boobies? She must've been talking about Ruène, the voluptuous, *extremely* underdressed woman we'd met en route to the demon world.

"There you have it! Undeniable eyewitness testimony! I dare you to talk your way out of this now!"

"Testimony!"

Following suit, Iluna parroted Lefi and raised her fist aggressively. *What a cutie.*

"H-Hold up. En's just telling us what she saw from her slightly subjective point of view, okay? I found the cat lady interesting because she was so unusual. And it's, uh, it's not like I was actually flirting with the busty demon woman?"

'Cause En cockblocked me before things could get hot and heavy! Little homegirl went surprisingly hard on defense, just like a certain basketball team captain in Dunk Shot.

"Hmph... Master, you must not lie."

"Lie? Me? No, no, no. Nooo way. I'm definitely, for sure not lying. Y'all know I love everyone in this dungeon. And above all else, I'm a thousand percent devoted to my wife! So how can you even think I'd ever be attracted to other women?"

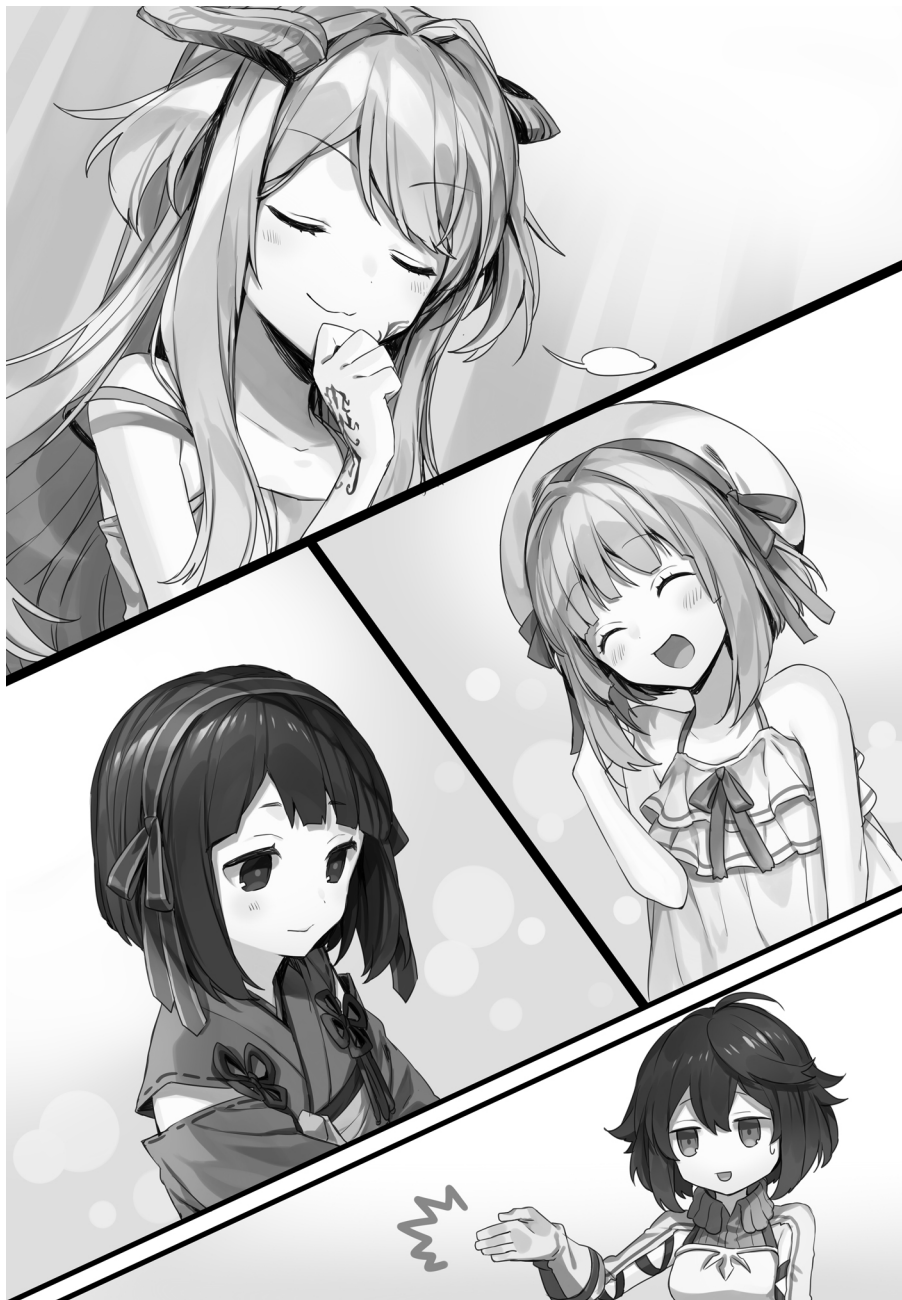
"Mrgh. I-I see..."

"Hee hee! Yukiki said he loves us!"

"Okay..."

"W-Wait! Don't you see that he's just pulling the wool over your eyes?!"

Nell rushed in with that interjection when she saw Lefi blushing and the two little girls squealing and wiggling in delight. *Grr... Well played, hero. Well played.* Of course *she* was the one who'd picked up on my craftiness.



“Geh... Ahem! In any case! Henceforth, I demand that you be more firm with women!”

“Yes, dear. I’ll be careful, dear.”

“Furthermore, you had best not forget your status as my husband! As such, you are not to act a fool on your expeditions away from our home! You must conduct yourself in a dignified manner befitting the position of the Supreme Dragon’s husband!”

“Roger that, my dearest wife. I’ll devote myself to the cause. Husband, out.”

“Hmph. So long as you know your place. You will *not* forget a single word I just said, else you *will* suffer the consequences. Right, then. Now that we have come to an understanding, I shall graciously allow you to take Nell to wife.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m incredibly thankful to receive your permiss—”
.....*Come again?*

The moment I thought something so weird couldn’t have possibly come out of Lefi’s mouth, Nell jumped into the conversation, clearly panicked.

“Oh my goodness! Lefi, s-stop! I-I didn’t mean it like *tha*—”

“Come, now, what are you saying? It is much too late for you to gloss it over. Regardless of what you say out loud, you cannot deny your feelings.”

“B-But I didn’t expect the conversation to take this turn so suddenly?!”

The two of them were talking like I wasn’t literally right there. I couldn’t deal with this baffling situation anymore, though, so I spoke up.

“Um, wait a sec, Lefi. What do you mean by that? Do you even realize what you said?”

“Hmm? Did you not bring her here with the intention of marrying her?”

Lefi looked down at me as I stared back up at her, confounded from the bottom of my heart. I was still sitting seiza-style on the floor.

“Like I could even *think* about picking up another wife this hot on the heels of marrying my first one! I only sent her back here so she wouldn’t get caught up in more fighting, considering all the enemies surrounding her in that place.”

“Oh? They were so powerful you had no choice but to evacuate her to the dungeon?”

“Well, not exactly, but...I figured she had worked plenty hard, y’know? So instead of leaving her in the demon world, I thought it’d be better if she rested for a while first. Which is why I sent her here.”

Especially since a bottle of Super Potion couldn’t actually restore a

person's physical strength. When I'd found Nell, her whole body covered in wounds, I'd realized she must have exhausted every last bit of her energy to survive. She'd been in such a bad state that she could barely lift a finger.

Still, I knew she would've forced herself to keep going beyond that for the sake of her friends' and comrades' survival. Even if I'd killed every single enemy there, she would never have abandoned the others. She would've found some way or another to keep fighting for her friends and the winged survivors. Though Nell and I hadn't known each other for very long, I knew her well enough to be right about that.

"R-Right... Just like Mr. Yuki said, he evacuated me here for my sake..."

Aw, hell, don't look at me like that with those shy, awkward eyes. Her sneaky peeks in my direction made *me* feel embarrassed and uncomfortable.

"Ahem... Like I was saying, I didn't have any ulterior motives for bringing Nell to the dungeon. I seriously only did it because the situation warranted it. Honest."

"Except this young miss said you sent her here after accepting her profession of love to you. Additionally, you saving her life served to deepen her feelings for you. I myself know without a doubt that she loves you from the depths of her heart."

"No! Stop! Lefi, stop talking! Stop talking, will you?! I told you that was a secret!"

"Nellie, you're crazy about Yukiki too, huh?!"

"Bwaaah?! Iluna, not you too!"

"..."

How exactly am I supposed to react in a situation like this? Should I smile? Hey, Shenji, what should I do?

Actually, I knew. It was time to stop running away from reality. So *that's what she said, huh?* Now I understood what Nell had been trying to tell me before she'd passed out. I'd gone out of my way to act like the easygoing smart-ass I was when I'd found her, but honestly, my mind had been so consumed by rage at seeing her battered condition that I could barely think enough to hold a proper conversation.

Nell apparently took my silence and apathetic expression negatively. Her face got even redder than I thought possible at having her feelings announced to the object of her affections. Unable to bear her humiliation any longer, she shrieked, "Ahhh! You idiot!" before zooming out of the real throne room toward the castle, tears in her eyes.

"Oh no. Did we make Nellie mad?"

"Do not be concerned. She was merely overwhelmed by her

embarrassment.”

“Well, uhhh... I-I guess I understand things better now. Yup, I’ve got it. But how the heck did the topic go from her feelings to marriage?”

With a wry smile on my face, I questioned Lefi as I stared off in the direction Nell had run.

“Ah, yes, about that. You see, she and I got to talking in your absence. The more I learned about her during her stay, the stronger my conclusion of her place in your life. If it is her, I would not mind accepting her as your second wife. Above all else, she is an excellent cook! I must admit that I painfully learned the importance of food while you and Leila were gone.”

Lefi had a faraway look in her eyes as she replied.

Food clinched her decision? For real?

Wait. What exactly *did* my peeps in the dungeon eat while I wasn’t around? Before I’d left with Leila and En, we’d made sure to cook enough meals to fill the fridge. We’d even prepped ingredients and recipes for them to use if those ran out.

“Tell me one thing first. You made sure Iluna ate decent food, right? I’m talking nutritious, balanced meals.”

Shii and the wraith sisters could survive without eating anything, but Iluna was a different story. She couldn’t live if she didn’t eat properly. Frankly, I didn’t care about Lefi’s or Lew’s eating habits because they were old enough to figure things out for themselves, but I was gonna lose my shit if they hadn’t fed Iluna right. *You don’t wanna catch this smoke, Lefi.*

“Y-Yes, you have nothing to fear on that front. The meals you made sustained us for a week. Following their depletion, however, I suppose it could be said that we managed to cook the remaining foodstuffs. Though I will grant that the results of our efforts were not particularly inspiring.”

“Yup, yup! We all worked hard together while the three of you were gone, Yukiki! Now, we’re sooo much better at cooking!”

Iluna puffed out her chest in pride, looking ridiculously pleased.

“Iluna, you’re good at cooking now?”

“Uh-huh! Which means I can grab tight to Yukiki’s heart through his stomach! I’ll teach you how to cook too, EnEn!”

“Please and thank you...”

I gave the little girls an amused sidelong glance before turning back to Lefi.

“All right, sounds like you had things handled. Then, back to the...other topic. Um... Are you seriously okay with that? Me picking up another wife, I mean.”

“As you might imagine, I would be lying if I said I did not have

my doubts. I would also be well within my rights to be furious should you ever deliberately become unfaithful to me. The truth of this world, however, is that strong males attract females. Though you are weaker than I am, you are overwhelmingly more powerful than a great many other males. Thus, it is inevitable that females would be drawn to you like flies to honey.”

Lefi paused to take a breath before continuing.

“Even amongst dragonkind, it is a common practice for powerful males to surround themselves with numerous females. I have trounced many an arrogant dragon who thought he could place me under his thumb. You can be certain they were made *thoroughly* aware not to overstep their positions.”

My dear wife exhaled deeply, the sigh wrenched from the depths of her very soul. *Dang, must’ve been an incredibly aggravating time in her life, huh? On that note, Miss Lefi, would you kindly roll back the “male” and “female” language?* It sounded too explicit to me and was giving me weird thoughts, so I wanted her to stop.

Still, I found what she said fascinating. This world fundamentally operated on the law of survival of the fittest. So from the perspective of maintaining and growing populations, polygamy was an ordinary and accepted concept for both demons and other races.

I had to wonder about her change of heart, though. She always got mad at me for being too soft on women, yet she was all for me marrying Nell. How could she be so positive about it?

Curious, I broke my gaze from Lefi’s and turned to face Iluna, who was still next to her.

“Th-Then, what about you, Iluna? Wouldn’t you hate it if I had more wives?”

“Huh? Nuh-uh, not really. Because when I grow up, and Shii grows up, and EnEn, ReiRei, RuiRui, and RohRoh too, you’re gonna marry all of us, right, Yukiki?”

Her words stunned me speechless. She wasn’t technically wrong since I’d said something along those lines when I’d told them about my marriage to Lefi, but, like, I’d only said it once, and I’d been joking.

“I sure wouldn’t like it if you married some stranger. But Nellie is sooo nice and sooo sweet, so I’ll allow it! And when we all become your brides too, Yukiki, we can be together forever! Thinking about it makes me super happy!”

Iluna’s innocent smile lit up her face. *What a cutie.* She was being insanely cute, but I’d never once thought she would approve of this. I was thrown for a loop by her support of the idea.

“There you have it, Yuki. The matter is settled as far as we are concerned. Granted, I acknowledge that it was a conclusion we drew

without your input. Should you be opposed to the marriage, then you are free to disregard it. We will not mind. *However.*"

Lefi grinned daringly before finishing her thought.

"I dare say you are man enough to take care of one woman who is truly in love with you. So why not further prove your temerity by showing the same courtesy to another?"

This little vixen. Is that something a wife would normally say to her husband? Goddamn is she something else.

I glanced over at our maids, who sat at a nearby table watching this all play out. In response to my unspoken request for their opinions, they both shook their heads vehemently as if saying, "We don't have anything of note to add." From there, my gaze moved to Shii, who sat with them. She beamed at me like she wasn't thinking of anything at all. *She's not just an angel. No, she's an archangel.*

Welp, time for me to be honest too, then. Much to my chagrin, I didn't actually hate the idea at all. It wasn't like I disliked Nell.

Heroes and chivalry and whatever were things I couldn't have cared less about. But judging from her behavior and attitude until now, I knew Nell's determination was legit. A brave young woman like her for sure had her own line in the sand. I seriously thought that anyone who stuck to their convictions was really cool and, more than anything, incredibly attractive as a person.

I even liked the reckless, unreliable side of her that put her in unnecessary danger. It barely ever made an appearance, but it made me want to protect her whenever we were together. Not to mention her looks. As vulgar as it was to say, she was definitely put together *really* well. The unvarnished truth was that she was a beautiful young lady who was very much my type.

Plus, Nell's existence had become vitally important to me. As important as Lefi, Iluna, and the rest of the dungeon gang. I didn't want any of them to ever die. As a result, if I'd never met Lefi and only ran into Nell instead, I would have easily fallen for her, simpleminded man that I was. But I *had* met Lefi, so the fact remained that I had Lefi by my side.

I love Lefi. I have no problem admitting I'm head over heels for her. This lazy, selfish sore loser is a thoughtful, observant, ridiculously big-hearted woman.

It would be impossible to find someone as amazing as her even if I searched all over the world. I'd have been lying if I said the thought of a harem didn't appeal to me as a man, but I also couldn't deny that a part of me rebelled emotionally against the concept.

If nothing else, I needed to talk to Nell face-to-face. I had to hear her thoughts and feelings in her own words, not from Lefi and the others.

“Lefi. I love you. I’m nuts about you. So, honestly, I don’t actually want another wife. But I can’t say I’m not fond of Nell either.”

“Mm... I shall tell you one thing. The man I love is excessively sweet on women. To be frank, it causes me endless trouble. Yet because of his personality, this man I love would not forgive himself for abandoning a woman who loves him from the bottom of her heart—a woman who would gladly give her life for his. Though I need not remind you that such a woman is not alone, for another who feels as she does stands before you, hm?”

“Ha ha, gotcha. In that case, I’m glad I was born a man. Being so popular with women will probably be the death of me, but what a way to go, right?”

Laughing sarcastically, I stood up from my forced seiza position.

“For now, I’ll have a nice, long chat with Nell.”

“Hah hah. Excellent. We shall wait for you here.”

Lefi said that with a gentle smile on her face.



I found Nell right away after she’d fled the real throne room. It only took me a second because she was still within the dungeon, so I just used Maps to root her out. She was inside the castle and had parked herself in front of one of the windows, which gave her a sweeping view of the meadow area outside. Hands pressed to her cheeks in embarrassment, she stared through the glass in a daze.

“Uh, h-heeey, Nell.”

“Gah! M-Mr. Yuki.”

She whipped around, startled by the sound of my voice. Immediately, her face went scarlet and her body froze. I stood motionless too, slack-jawed, unsure of what to say to her... But then I abruptly remembered the thing I wanted to give her, so I opened Inventory and finally forced my mouth to form words.

“So, um...here. You can have this back.”

“Ah! Durendal!”

Name: Durendal

Quality: S++

Power: 1,029

Stamina: 1,692

Harnessed Magic: 1,002

Special Abilities: Cognizant Obstruction,
Indestructibility

Abilities: Self-Repair 8

Titles: Guardian Holy Sword of Order, The
Indestructible Blade

Special Effects: Magical Efficacy Increase (High), Physical Attack Power Increase (High), Recovery Increase (High)

A guardian sword only heroes are permitted to wield. Its blade never breaks because of its eternal duty to protect others. All stats are multiplied by 1.5 when equipped by a user with the hero class.

I'd pulled out her holy sword—the one she always kept strapped to her waist. When I'd picked it up, it'd been unsheathed, but now, it was hanging out in a modest-looking scabbard designed by Demon Lord Yuki. *Holy moly is its stamina stupid high.* Not that its other stats weren't, though; they were still higher than En's, and I knew for a fact that she'd grown much stronger. Whatever. I wasn't worried, because En made up for it with her super useful skills and special effects.

Besides, En was nowhere near done developing. Compared to Nell's holy sword, which had already attained its final form, my girl still had a long way to go due to her crazy high potential. There was one more minor point in my sword girl's favor too: En belonged to a specific race, Magic Blade, while Durendal didn't. That made her all the more special. *Darn tootin', En's special. Holy swords ain't got nothin' on her.*

Anyway, back to the present. Nell's expression finally transformed as she took her weapon from me. Instead of the embarrassment she'd seemed to be cloaked in for a while now, she looked extremely relieved.

"Th-Thank goodness. I was so afraid the enemy would get their hands on it. You kept it safe for me, Mr. Yuki?"

"Yeah, I did. I spotted it right away, glittering in the dirt like it was. Did you drop it while you were fighting?"

"Yes... The truth is, those fiends actually captured me once. I managed to slip away thanks to their idiocy, but they kicked Durendal away while they had me pinned down."

"Whoa, for real? You kicked ass unarmed? Nice."

"I did. Because I had this with me. It's the gift you gave me, Mr. Yuki."

She pulled something out from behind her and showed it to me. *Oh, Gekka.* It was the dagger I'd given her back in the humans' royal capital. *I see, I see. She's actually been using it, has she?*

"I was able to continue fighting because of Gekka. Which is why...I'd like to thank you again, Mr. Yuki. For saving me."

"Ha ha. I can't take credit for saving you when you worked so damn hard to save yourself. I didn't actually do a whole lot, all things

considered.”

I shrugged carelessly, but Nell shook her head at me, refusing to let me downplay my help.

“But you did so much more than just saving me. I can have this conversation with you because I’m alive. You’re the reason I’m still here. Truthfully? I’d fully expected to die back then.”

I kept my silence, listening very carefully to what she was saying.

“Oh, I don’t mean suicide, by the way. That never crossed my mind. It’s just that the enemy outnumbered me and I was at my limit. I was honestly terrified. All I wanted to do was sob and escape, but for better or worse, I’m a hero. That was why I thought, ‘I’ll make my last stand here. I’ll die while fighting to my last breath.’ Thanks to you, though, such an end never came to pass.”

Nell smiled a little before continuing.

“Because you saved me, Mr. Yuki. In more ways than one. I was on the brink of death, you see... Would you like to know something interesting? To me, you were the very definition of a knight in shining armor, come to rescue a damsel in distress.”

“Damn. That’s the most insulting thing I’ve ever heard.”

Her image of me was so unbelievably out of character that all I could do was scratch my cheek and huff out an awkward laugh as I tried to hide my embarrassment. Maybe she saw right through my bluff because she bestowed upon me a gentle, affectionate smile. Then, in a deliberate attempt to lighten the mood, she exhaled dramatically and placed both hands on her hips like a mother about to scold her naughty child.

“You know something, Mr. Yuki? You’re completely right about that. Crude, insensitive, idiotic, selfish, picky about the weirdest things, and did I mention insensitive? Those words describe you a lot better than ‘knight in shining armor,’ so I take back what I said. I do *not* need a boor like you defiling the perfect vision I have of my Prince Charming, thank you very much.”

“S-Sure. M-My bad, I guess?”

Shiit. She said “insensitive” twice.

“Good grief, Mr. Yuki, I strongly advise you to consider acting with your dignity in mind moving forward. You may be a demon lord, but you must know that no one will take you seriously so long as you keep acting silly.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am. I’ll pay more attention to my conduct.”

Being lectured by a girl younger than me deflated me like a balloon. I was sure I looked insanely pathetic right now, even by my standards.

“Okay, since you clearly understand, this concludes your reprimand!”

Nell giggled joyfully at having taken me down a notch. For an instant, she hesitated like she wanted to say something more. The brief moment of indecision passed, though, and she smiled as if nothing had happened before speaking once more.

“Well, that’s all I wanted to say! Thank you! And there’s absolutely no reason for you to concern yourself with the things Lefi and the others said!”

“Nell...”

“Oh, please, don’t look at me like that! I won’t deny my feelings for you, but really, they’re the sort of feelings one would have for their savior. Nothing more. Lefi and the other girls just misunderstood and got ahead of themselves.”

She’s trying not to make this hard on me, huh?

Nell kept chattering away, smiling so determinedly that it hurt to watch.

“So... So really, Mr. Yuki, you have nothing to worry about. All you have to do is treat me like you normally do. That’ll be more than enough for me.”

It sounded like she was desperately trying to convince herself of what she was saying instead of me.

“You’re such a pain in the ass.”

Staring down at her, I thumped my hand on top of her head and gave her hair a good ruffle.

“Eep!”

“First of all, I have no idea what you’re blabbering on about. And second of all, I don’t need someone younger being so dang considerate of me!”

“Grr! You have the gall to say such a thing when you’re infinitely more childish than I am?!”

She smacked my hand away angrily, pouting. I grinned down at her in response.

“Mwa ha ha ha! That’s right! I’m a demon lord, and demon lords are intrinsically selfish creatures who do whatever they damn well please!”

“Ugh! I-I can’t believe you! Especially when I poured my heart out to you so earnestly! Oh, and speaking of, I suggest you stop wriggling your way out of uncomfortable situations by playing that ‘I’m a demon lord’ card. It’s getting *quite* tiresome, you know!”

Oho, she knows me well, eh?

“But demon lords are great. Being one is amazing. I’m as free as a bird and don’t need to practice any self-restraint. I can say what I’m about to precisely *because* I’m a demon lord who rejoices in that freedom. Nell, you’re the complete opposite of me. You’re a buzzkill. ‘Because I’m a hero,’ blah, blah, blah. You use that excuse for

everything, and in reality, you're killing yourself every time you do. So I suggest *you* stop doing that."

"I... No, you're wrong. I'm not killing myself or any such nonsense."

She struggled to hold back her anger as she muttered her rebuke. I just shook my head at her and kept going.

"Believe what you want about yourself, but it's clear as day to an outsider. Even if giving your life for the sake of others is a virtue for you, for me, it's a completely different story if it means destroying yourself. You lived with my family long enough, so tell me, did you notice? Every last one of them lives by following their instincts."

"Hmm... That's very true."

Her reply came with a soft giggle and traces of a smile that I doubted she was even aware of. I bet she'd had a good time being a part of the freedom and chaos of my family. Lefi aside, even Iluna and Shii did whatever the heck they wanted, those little rascals.

"Nell, you're putting yourself through the wringer with your whole 'tough hero' act. The harder you try to play that role, the more desperate you come across. You can give yourself freedom while still being a hero. Hell, you don't even need anyone's permission to do it."

She stayed quiet.

"Tell me something. What is it you *genuinely* want?"

Nell held her tongue, initially refusing to answer my question. Tears welled up in her eyes, and her expression showed just how hard she was trying to hold back the dam of thoughts and emotions she'd been suppressing in the deepest, darkest corners of her being. Finally, after a period of silence, she softly confessed.

"I... I want to be with...you and the others."

"Good. Then be with us. My dungeon fam all like you and would welcome you with open arms. Same goes for me, of course."

Well, there *was* the small matter of Lew's initial wariness toward Nell that we'd have to deal with, but that was no biggie. Lew was a dummy, so it wouldn't take her long to warm up to the hero.

"So, uh, let's go back to the *other* topic. I gotta admit, it took me by surprise, so I'm still pretty confused..."

"Oh, right. Forgive me. It must have been quite annoying to discover such a thing."

She sounded a little sad when she spoke. I hurriedly shook my head, wanting to correct her misunderstanding.

"N-No, that's not what I mean. I... Okay, I'm gonna be honest with you. I'm a simple man, so when I found out you have feelings for me, it made me ridiculously happy."

"R-Really...?"

"Yeah, really. And, um, when I saw you all beat up back then, I

gotta say, rage practically melted my brain. My reaction made me realize how much I actually care about you. A-As much as I care about everyone in my family, y'know?"

"..."

"Thing is, I... I'm already married to Lefi, and I never thought I could dishonor her with feelings for someone else. But then Lefi herself went and opened her big mouth. 'I dare say you are man enough to take care of one woman who is truly in love with you. So why not further prove your temerity by showing the same courtesy to another?' She said that word for word, Nell."

"Heh. That's definitely something Lefi would say."

She snickered, and my embarrassment almost made me shut up, but I forced myself to keep going. I couldn't stop now, no matter what.

"So, if y-you're okay with it...wh-why don't you live here for a while?"

"In this castle?"

"Yeah. I already told your friends I sent you to my home because of your injuries, so you might as well take the chance to rest up. If you wanna tell them you're fine, you can send them a letter from, uh...what was the name of that town nearby? Oh, right, Alfiro."

"But—"

"No buts. You know damn well how much effort you put in. Nobody would complain if you wanted to do your own thing for a little bit. And I, uh... Well, I'd be ecstatic if you stuck around too. Even if it's not for super long."

I turned away from her, pretending to look out the window in order to hide how red I was getting.

"As for the whole 'second wife' thing, we'll set it aside for now. You said so too, didn't you? That it was too sudden of a turn in the conversation? Which is why, um...w-we could consider this testing the waters. A-A time to, you know, learn more about each other. Basically, you staying with us in the dungeon for a while gives us the opportunity to deepen our bond. Something like that."

I wanted to crawl into a hole and die. I could *feel* how pathetic I must look as I fumbled incoherently for the right words. Still, the corners of Nell's lips tugged upward. I noticed that she seemed a little more cheerful now, watching me make a fool of myself.

"Oh, I think I understand what you mean. We start out as friends before fully committing to a romantic relationship?"

"Uh, well, yeah, pretty much. Also, I know I'm being kinda selfish and lame saying all this considering how lopsided the arrangement is in my favor."

"No, not at all. I don't think you're 'lame,' as you put it. Not even a little bit."

“Y-You sure about that?”

“I am, Mr. Yuki. It’s clear that you put a great deal of thought into this, in your own way, because you didn’t want to hurt me or the others. I really, truly appreciate it.”

Nell beamed at me.

“Right, then. I agree to your suggestion and will stay in this castle for a little longer. Would it be all right if I spent time with you and the others inside as well?”

I grinned back at her.

“Heck yeah, you can. You don’t even have to ask. It’s settled, then, Miss Hero. You’ll be living at my demon lord castle for as long as you need to recuperate from your harrowing ordeal.”

“Heh. ‘Recuperate’ is definitely the right word because I’m exhausted.”

“Well, we *certainly* can’t have you feeling like that. Feel free to tell me if there’s anything you need. As the master of this castle, I shall provide my esteemed guest with the finest hospitality.”

Mwa ha ha ha! An inn, a hot spring, gorgeous views, and fun, energetic little girls—this magnificent demon lord castle has it all. We provide any service a customer desires to satisfy their needs, so come on down and enjoy yourself!

“Hmm... I’ll take you up on that offer right away, then. Let me stay like this for just a bit, okay?”

With that, Nell wrapped her arms around my waist and rested her head on my chest. I could feel her warmth through my skin as she pressed her soft, feminine body against me.

“Oh, um, shoot... M-Miss Nell?”

I was absolutely flustered by her action, which showed through my babbling question. She remained unfazed, though, and spoke very softly, her head still on my chest.

“You’re so...warm.”

She’s so much smaller than I am. Dainty, almost. A girl with a frame far too delicate to shoulder the burdens she did. Without a word, I did the only thing I could for her and gently stroked her hair while she held me.





I found it to be a veritable shock when the young hero suddenly appeared in the throne room. Her clothes were a tattered mess and her body was covered in mud and grit. What looked to be blood had congealed in various locations as well, leaving her in a state that could be described as nothing short of horrendous. Frankly speaking, I was not certain at first glance if the girl yet lived.

After a moment of befuddlement brought on by the hero's unexpected arrival, I immediately set to work. I asked the little girls playing nearby to bring me a wet towel and a pail of water. Of Lew, doing her very awkward best at chores, I requested the first aid kit. And when I began to use my Restorative Magic, I finally noticed something peculiar.

Despite the girl's terribly battered form, Analysis showed that she still had a good deal of life left in her. Nowhere near the full amount, of course, but more than enough. I exhaled quietly, relieved to know that the girl was not at death's door. Then, I approached her motionless figure to inspect her more closely.

The hero breathed properly. There were no signs of any alarming swelling or breakages in her body. Rather, contrasting her ragged attire and the dried blood that marked her all over, I bafflingly found that not a single wound marred her flesh.

Ah, I see. He used some technique to heal her prior to sending her here. The lack of injuries indicated that he had most likely made the girl drink one of those potions he always had at the ready. I knew not how he had managed to transport the hero to the dungeon, but I understood the clever feats of magic he was capable of.

"Is Nellie okay...?"

"Yes. She is merely asleep right now. It seems Yuki treated her first, wherever they were."

I rubbed the golden-haired little girl's head in an attempt to soothe her blatant unease. *I hope the situation is not too precarious for him.* While I would never say it aloud because I knew the children here would become anxious, I could admit to experiencing a touch of worry myself. Not for that man's safety, however, but for his heart.

Fundamentally, my husband was dependable. Yet there was no denying that small, overly emotional part of him. He tended to act recklessly because he cared so deeply for those around him. Due to that, I privately thought it best if someone stayed close and kept watch over him, ergo my insistence on sending Leila and En to accompany him on this venture. Leila would likely be unable to control him, but at the very least, I had been reasonably confident he

would not be too rash with En in tow. Even so, a hint of regret flashed through me at not having gone with him myself, though I acknowledged that it was too late for such a sentiment.

What is done is done. I could agonize over my decision later. At present, I had more important matters to attend to, chiefly the hero. It was necessary for me to wipe the filth from her body before moving her to a proper resting place instead of leaving her asleep on the floor.

A few hours later, the girl opened her eyes.

“Ngh...”

“Ah, you are awake.”

The young hero, Nell, responded to my comment by sluggishly surveying her surroundings from within her futon.

“Huh...? Where am I...?”

“You are in Yuki’s dungeon.”

At the sound of my husband’s name, Nell’s eyes widened and she sat up in a rush.

“M-Mr. Yuki!”

“Calm yourself, for he is absent. You alone arrived here.”

Nell seemed to immediately comprehend the situation from my words, so she replied softly.

“Oh... I see... Mr. Yuki saved me? Wait, Lefi, did you just say I’m in the dungeon? The one in the Demonic Forest?”

No, I stand corrected. She did not understand anything at all. Apparently, she had simply been rendered speechless by the situation because her mind could not keep up with it.

By the way, the others had fallen asleep some time ago. I remained awake this late out of habit—one formed out of countless nights passing the time playing board games with my husband. I did not feel the least bit slumberous. Although, thinking back on said habit in relation to my husband, I found it odd that he could be so energetic during the day despite staying up late with me.

“Yes, indeed. How are you feeling? I did not notice any injuries on you, but...”

She looked down at herself in response to my question and tilted her head in confusion.

“What in the...? You’re right, I don’t have any wounds.”

“Ah, I believe that is because Yuki healed you with a potion, for when you appeared, I saw no visible damage on you.”

“B-But... But even my old scars are gone? My body was riddled with them from training...”

Nell murmured those last words, practically speaking to herself. I answered her with a shrug.

“The particular brand of potion he uses is exceptionally effective,

as you have just learned. What matters is that you are hale once more. Here, eat this. You must be famished by now.”

“Oh, r-right, I am. Thank you.”

Though she was clearly still perplexed, Nell nevertheless thanked me politely and took the bowl of rice porridge I offered. She lifted a spoonful to her mouth, tasted it, then paused.

“Um, Lefi? I think someone might have mixed up the salt and sugar when they made this.”

Her words made me unintentionally groan in dismay. *Confound it, not again.* I had made sure to sample it during the cooking process, but I had evidently blundered somewhere. *I wonder which step...*

“Ah, forgive me. With Leila and Yuki away in the demon world, not a single soul that remains here is adept at cooking. Rest while I remake it. I shan’t be long.”

“Oh, no, it’s fine. It’s still edible, after all. Thank you, Lefi.”

Nell giggled and I said nothing. I felt a measure of embarrassment as I watched her tuck into the wrongly seasoned gruel again, a smile on her face. Since there was no need for me to enter the kitchen anymore, I sat back down.

We whiled away some time in silence. The only sounds in the air were her muted slurps as she ate the porridge and the soft breathing of the wee lasses sleeping nearby in their futon.

“Hey, Lefi. Mr. Yuki saved my life.”

The young girl’s whisper broke the quiet.

“Did he, now? I am glad to hear my husband put himself to good use.”

“‘Husband’... Your husband, huh? I remember now. You and Mr. Yuki got married, right?”

“Y-Yes, we did. He mentioned it to you during your time in the demon world?”

“Yup. And he was incredibly happy when he did.”

She grinned cheerfully and I felt my cheeks heating in response. In the next instant, I abruptly noticed the strained, unnatural stiffness of her smile. It was as if she was desperately forcing herself to subdue her innermost feelings. To curb them from rising to the surface.

As dragonkind, I was not particularly sensitive to anthropoid emotions, but this look I knew well. *It is the face of one who has given up on the mate they sought.*

“Correct me if I am wrong, but are you perhaps in love with Yuki?”

“Wha— Huh?! No! Um, y-you’re wrong!”

I could not help laughing wryly at her uncontrollable panic. *She is quite easy to read.* I found it fitting that someone who wore her heart on her sleeve had been bestowed the grandiose role of hero.

Without warning, a memory floated through my mind. Once upon a time, I had burned to death a man bragging about being a hero. But even as a dragon, it had been clear to me that he was little more than a worthless pest who knew nothing about human society. So perhaps this girl was just an inherently honest person and her role was irrelevant.

"There is no reason for such agitation, so calm yourself. I only wondered, is all. Though in reality, it turns out I do indeed have the right of it, yes?"

"...Yes, you do. I think I'm in love with Mr. Yuki."

"You *think*? Are you so uncertain of your own feelings?"

"I-I mean, I've never been in love before, so I wouldn't know."

Ah, I see. This hero is the same as me... Good grief. That man truly does have a talent for seduction, unwitting though it may be.

"A-Also, um, the way he saved me was so incredibly attractive. It's hard *not* to love him after that..."

The girl's cheeks pinkened as she recalled the incident. Then, she began relating the chain of events leading up to it.

"Hmm... Well, his arrival was certainly timely, then."

"Yup. It's honestly so uncanny how good Mr. Yuki's timing is. He did the same thing when we were in Alisia's royal capital, you know."

"Heh, I am not surprised to hear that. He plays the fool often but is quite wily when it comes to striking at the perfect moment. Yuki is just that kind of man."

"He really is! With his ever so cool expression, he takes care of everything by himself before anyone can even blink. I'm so used to being surprised now thanks to him."

We chuckled softly in commiseration.

"But wow, Mr. Yuki really is your husband, huh, Lefi? Darn! If it was my fate to be rejected by him anyway, I should have just plucked up my courage and told him how I feel sooner."

The young hero's laughter subsided, leaving behind a sad smile on her face. *Aha. I understand now. This girl and I truly are the same.* Just like me, she had been spellbound by that man's aura upon encountering it. That idiotic man with his strange sensibilities who nevertheless made me smile so naturally just by being with him.

Were it me, would I be able to survive on my own after experiencing his kindness and his warmth? No. Impossible. The minute I came to this conclusion, my mouth opened and words tumbled out without my volition.

"If that is the case, you should simply live here as well."

"I... What?"

The girl's voice sounded eerily flat.

“I am certain he would not reject the idea because he is exceedingly fond of you. And if, in time, the two of you were to form your own bond, why, I would not complain in the least.”

“I... I mean...that would make me happy, of course, but...what about *you*, Lefi? Are you sure you’d be fine with that?”

“Well, I admit I have my reservations. More than that, however, I understand your feelings to a painful extent.”

I uttered only the truth. I found the thought of separating from Yuki unbearable, so how could I allow this girl whom I called a friend to suffer that agony? It would be much too cruel. Mayhap the old me could have easily let such a thing come to pass, but who I was now would not permit it. Who I was now knew the overwhelming comfort and joy of being connected to someone precious.

“Furthermore, while I may be his only wife at the moment, I suspect his passel of spouses will increase once these lasses age.”

I spoke to her with my eyes on the two little girls near us—the bloodsucker asleep in her futon and the slime asleep on her cushion. The man himself always said yes when they badgered him about becoming his brides, humoring the children as adults are wont to do. Yet I suspected I was not wrong about my prediction for the future. There were our two maids to consider as well. I could well imagine a day they, too, might become his wives.

An unconscious smile curled the corners of my lips as I pictured this future. And none would complain were this lone girl to slip in alongside the rest of us. *Gracious, what a turn of events.* Even I, the individual in question, would never have expected the Supreme Dragon, feared the world over, to show such consideration toward others.

I love him. I loved that man, but I loved my life in this boisterous dungeon almost as much. I measured everyone here to be worth their weight in gold. It would be difficult to—nay, impossible to replace them. The knowledge that I found their existence priceless had taken root before I ever realized it. Thus, bringing this girl into the fold and spending time with her would surely add to our wonderful, entertaining memories.

“Sleep for now. You are still not at your full strength, yes? Once tomorrow comes, these little ones and Lew will be awake as well. Let us all talk about this together at that time.”

“Okay, yeah... Hey, Lefi?”

“What is it?”

“Thank you. I really love that incredibly kind side of you, you know.”

“Wha— Hmph. Enough with your silly prattle. Sleep.”

“Sure. Thanks again. Good night, Lefi.”

“Yes, good night.”
And so, the night wore on.



Instead of the real throne room, the go-to spot for everyone in the dungeon, we were currently in the rarely used—never used until now, actually—but spacious living room of my demon lord castle. It was more than big enough for all of our beloved family pets to hang out in with us, which they just so happened to be doing. In other words, every one of the dungeon’s residents had gathered here at my command.

“And there you have it, folks. She’ll be staying with us for a while to recuperate.”

“I, um... I’m excited to spend time with you all.”

“So you are not taking her to wife?”

“You must be sooo happy, Nellie! You get to be Yukiki’s bride too!”

“Chill with the baseless speculation, would ya, peanut gallery? Damn.”

She’s just here for some much-needed R and R, okay? That’s all this is.
I cleared my throat and continued.

“Make sure you treat her well. How ’bout a round of applause to formally welcome our guest.”

Immediately, everyone started clapping loudly for the young hero standing next to me. She thanked them profusely, blushing slightly. It wasn’t a *huge* deal, but I kinda wished that, outside of Shii and the wraith triplets, my dungeon monsters would stop their versions of applause. I was talking about our pets, who were camped behind everyone else. *Peeps, I appreciate it, but cut it out.*

That went double for the giant blood serpent, Orochi. It was whipping its tail back and forth, smacking the ground with it in lieu of clapping. And each whack sent tremors through the floor. *Enough! Or at least be gentler, sheesh.*

“Right, then. O great hero who joined the demon lord’s party, it’s your turn to say a few words.”

“Um, it’d probably be best if you *didn’t* call me that, Mr. Yuki. It could create groundless misunderstandings.”

“Right, then. O paragon of a hero who’s befriended the demon lord’s party, why don’t you tell us a little something about your aspirations for this stay?”

“Huh? M-My aspirations? Okay, uhhh... W-Well, I haven’t known you guys for very long, so I’d honestly love to learn more about everyone. So...I’m very much looking forward to making a lot of memories with you all.”

“Us too, Nellie!”

Iluna led the charge with her cheerful response, everybody else sharing their two cents with the hero too. *Good, good. Looks like everyone's gonna get along just fine.* Sure warmed the cockles of my demon lord heart to know that. We'd ignore the fact that I'd had to light the fire under my family's butts; I was just glad they were all so enthusiastic about the plan now.

“Okay, that concludes the introduction. Let's move on to the next topic on the agenda. Did anything happen while we were gone?”

Lefi answered my question on behalf of the group.

“Aside from Nell's sudden appearance, I would wager nothing particularly out of the ordinary. Ah, there was one occasion when a group of demons trespassed into the forest outside not long after your departure. I cannot recall anything else, however.”

“So what you're saying is that invaders don't count as ‘anything’? That right?”

“Precisely. Because nothing actually occurred. I informed our pets of their presence and they drove them out. Shortly thereafter, I believe some monsters devoured them. The end.”

Well, all right, then. Ashes to ashes, I guess. RIP, bozos. I had to wonder if those demons had been the fiends' minions, though. They'd been hassling the hell out of me for a while now, and they were the only ones doing so. *Could my true identity have gotten exposed during the tournament? Nah, that's probably not it. They showed up right after we left, which doesn't fit the time line.*

The goons might've been investigating whether the masked man at the humans' royal capital was me, then. There was a very real possibility that they'd make quick work of piecing together the fact that that guy and the masked man in the demon world were one and the same. But that was a problem for future me to deal with if or when it occurred. I'd trample the folks coming at me one at a time, in the order they showed up.

Ugh... I felt my temper rising just thinking about the goddamn fiends. Especially their boss, the scumbag ginger bastard. I really, *really* regretted not ending him when I'd had the chance, but I'd kill him with my own hands soon enough. *Enjoy what little time you have left in this world, you giant waste of space.* I could revel in plotting his demise later, though. It was time to focus on other things.

Side note, I'd entrusted Lefi with a degree of authority over the dungeon before I'd left for the demon world. She'd had the power to operate it in case trouble had shown up while I was gone. Specifically, she'd been able to do things like use the Maps function within the dungeon's territory, activate the Remote Communication ability so she could talk with the pets, reset traps, and browse certain categories in

the DP Catalog.

But my dear wife was kind of inept when it came to the interface. She hadn't really understood my explanation of how to use it, so it turned out that she'd pretty much relied on the Maps and Remote Communication functions alone. It wasn't her fault, though. If you'd never played video games, it was only natural to lack the necessary instincts to understand how to operate the dungeon's menu.

"Beyond that, the only further issue to arise was food. I nigh burst into tears of joy when Nell cooked for us, as it was the first time in what felt like ages that I had tasted something delicious."

"Hmm... That gives me an idea. Nell, why don't you help me and Leila prepare meals from now on?"

"Okay, I'll do my best!"

She clenched both her fists, radiating eagerness. Okay, so technically, she was a guest here, buuut... Taking our future into account, it wasn't gonna hurt to have her help out with chores around the dungeon.

"Ah, speaking of food, you need not prepare dinner tonight, Yuki. You may rest or do what you will until it is ready."

"Wait, for real? You sure?"

"Yes. I only ask that you wait anywhere but the usual living room. You cannot stay here either. Nell, you will accompany him. Hmm, let me see... I think it best if you both venture to somewhere secluded, far from others' gazes, where you can extol your love for each other."

"..."

"..."

Blushing scarlet thanks to Lefi, Nell peeked up at me. *For Pete's sake, don't look at me like that.* Her expression hit me like a ton of bricks. I couldn't deal with the feeling it gave me while we were in front of Iluna and the rest, whose eyes were glued to us.

"Ahem. All righty, then. We'll be at the inn. What about the little-girl gang?"

"Do not concern yourself with them either. All you need to focus on at present is deepening your relationship with the hero."

"O-Okay, got it."

The only thing I could do was agree to Lefi's order even as I tried to figure out what she was planning to do.

One change of scenery later and we were at the inn situated inconspicuously behind the castle. Facing the inner courtyard, we sat on our respective floor cushions in the Japanese-style room, one Nell herself had been in a few times already.

"Sooo, uhhh... Wonder what they're up to in there."

"Y-Yes. I'm a little curious about that too."

“...”
“...”
“...”

Dead silence. A silence that felt, how should I put it...extremely embarrassing. *This is all her fault, dagnabbit.* Ever since Lefi'd run her mouth about “extolling our love” or whatever, Nell and I had become way too conscious of each other. *When I get my hands on her...* I wouldn't do squat, of course, but jeez, my wife was literally putting more work into our relationship than we were. And so enthusiastically too. Her attitude might've made the men of the world jealous, but it only made me feel sorta lonely.

“Hey, um, Mr. Yuki.”

Apparently still embarrassed, Nell gazed bashfully up at me.

“S-Sup?”

“How... How did the tournament turn out?”

“Oh, yeah, that. I got disqualified.”

“What?! Why?!”

“Weeell, the fiends' boss showed up as a spectator and I thought it'd be the perfect chance to kill him. One thing led to another and they gave me the boot.”

“I see. That certainly sounds like an unjustified disqualification to me. Honestly, Mr. Yuki...you're an unexpected character in many ways, hm?”

“Dang, you're serious when you say that, huh?”

I grinned at Nell's earnestness.

“Oh, yeah. That old man, your master swordsman buddy. He is *hella* strong. Even with the difference in our stats, it took me forever and a day to beat him. He gave as good as he got too. Better, actually.”

“Wait, Mr. Yuki, you fought Mr. Lemiro? And *won*?!”

“Yup, we got matched up. Let me tell ya, that's one scary-ass old man.”

All in all, he hadn't done much of a number on my HP, but he sure had boggled my mind with all his techniques. The best way I could describe our fight was that I'd most definitely felt a tremendous amount of skill in each of his movements. For me, our face-off had been a fantastic learning opportunity.

“Just to let you know, he's actually the most powerful person in the human world. In his youth, he apparently defeated even Catastrophe-level monsters.”

Nell stared at me, a slightly stunned expression on her face. “*Catastrophe-level*”? Oh, I know what she means. The classification system that divided monsters into seven categories: Harmless, Hazardous, Human, War, Disaster, Catastrophe, and Calamity. Catastrophe was second from the top, and though Lefi wasn't a

monster, she was solidly in the Calamity class. Taking that into account, I could easily understand how powerful monsters on the level below hers were.

It was hard to imagine even demons, with their way higher physical capabilities, defeating things like that, let alone stupid humans. But based on what Nell said, the old man's stats had to have been crazy high when he was younger. I felt a chill rush through me imagining what a powerhouse he must've been back then to be able to take on Catastrophe-level enemies. *That dude is freaking terrifying.*

"Not to toot my own horn, but *I've* killed a dragon, and they're supposed to be the strongest race in the world. So I definitely want to grow powerful enough to beat the strongest human easily on my own."

The dungeon's power had played a huge role in my win against the damned dragon. On second thought, though, scratch that. It was almost entirely thanks to the dungeon that I'd won. All I'd managed to do was grin and bear the excruciating pain.

Sheesh, there are just too many powerful people in this world. I'd said it before, but I felt the need to say it again: I was damn glad to have been reborn as a demon lord, and a well-made one at that. It had quite literally saved my ass.

Hmm... Reflecting on it now, though, I realized that a part of me had definitely been relying too much on the jacked-up physical abilities that came with being a demon lord. I needed to remind myself of my early days here, when I'd been wary of everything and acted cautiously. If I didn't start behaving like that to some extent again, I might end up reliving the fate of a certain prideful King of Heroes. *I definitely don't need hubris to be my downfall.*

With that in mind, I knew exactly which course of action to take moving forward: "focus on surviving." I'd reflect on the choices I'd made since coming here, make this my new motto, and proceed accordingly. At least for the foreseeable future.

"I... You're the most reckless person I know, Mr. Yuki."

"Duh. I'm a demon lord, and do you know what demon lords do? They live to push limits and bend rules."

"I've never heard that before."

Nell giggled softly.

"Only natural since I'm the first one to practice this way of life! Mwa ha ha! Feast your eyes on the one who will forge the true path of the demon lord!"

"What nonsense is that?"

She smiled cheerfully at me before a gentle, affectionate look settled on her face. With it came more silence. Except this time, it was the nice, comfortable kind.

“...Mr. Yuki.”

“Hmm?”

“Um...never mind.”

“Aw, come on, you gotta tell me now. Can’t leave me hanging like that.”

“No, really, it’s nothing.”

Then, she rested her head on my shoulder. I said nothing in response. Though I felt a little guilty because of Lefi, I still accepted the peacefulness her weight brought with it.

And so, the two of us sat side by side, quietly enjoying our time together. We didn’t need to do anything else.

Epilogue: Dinner Together

“Dinner is ready! The two of you may now return!”

Lefi’s voice came through the special door that connected our living room, aka the real throne room, to every other part of my dungeon. Seemed Nell’s and my relaxing time together at the inn was now over.

“About dang time. Wanna get outta here, Nell?”

“Yup, sounds good to me.”

We stood up and put our cushions away, then walked next to each other over toward Lefi, who was waiting beyond the door with her arms folded.

“Excellent. Close your eyes.”

“Huh? Seriously?”

“Indeed. Close your eyes.”

“Uh, okay, I guess.”

“Will do.”

When I did as she instructed, Lefi grabbed my hand. Hers was silky and cool to the touch. I assumed she was holding Nell’s with her other too.

We followed her lead, being careful where we stepped so we didn’t trip and fall, and a few moments later, she said we could open our eyes. The first thing I saw was a huge, luxurious spread of different dishes. All sorts of delicious smells filled the room, making me even hungrier than I already was.

Did Leila make all this? Just as that thought flashed through my mind the second I saw the table full to the edges with a ridiculous amount of food, I almost immediately realized that she most likely hadn’t. How? Because the setup was just a teensy bit sloppy. When Leila cooked, the way she arranged the food so beautifully further stimulated one’s appetite, so it was easy to tell this wasn’t her doing. Compared to her style, the lavish feast in front of us now didn’t look nearly as refined. Even so, a single glance was enough to tell anyone that whoever had arranged it had been thinking deeply of those who would be eating the food.

Aside from the three of us, everyone else in our family was already seated at the table. The little-girl gang, wraith sisters included, beamed at us.

“Whooooa! Everything looks incredible!”

“I... All this food...”

“Heh, do you understand now?”

Lefi grinned boldly, clearly pleased with herself. I questioned her while staring wide-eyed at the food-covered table.

“Lefi...did you make all this?”

“Indeed. Well, the little ones and Lew helped as well. What say you? Have I not improved compared to my middling attempts before?”

“You sure have. This is amazing.”

I wasn’t kidding either. It was like night and day. While living in this dungeon with Lefi, I’d had a number of opportunities to taste her cooking. Satan’s honest truth, though, the only word I could use to describe her culinary ability was “catastrophic.”

I suspected there was one simple reason for her being a disaster in the kitchen, and that was her strength as the Supreme Dragon. It made her dogshit at using her fine motor skills—the things required for delicate work like cooking. She could control her strength if she really needed to, though, like when she was playing with the kids. Naturally, she was careful to use very little of it so she wouldn’t hurt them.

That said, cooking was another story entirely. For example, something as basic as cracking eggs was a tall task for Lefi. A tiny amount of force wouldn’t be enough to break the shell, but overdo it and you risked smashing it to pieces, ruining the egg inside. Everyone knew it required a precise balance of power.

Cutting things with a knife was also a challenge for her. When she tried to exert just enough pressure to slice into something, she ended up squeezing the handle so hard she crushed it.

I could sympathize with her, though. When my stats had shot up after killing the damned dragon, I’d struggled tremendously with controlling my increased strength. And I acknowledged this as someone weaker than her, so I couldn’t imagine how much tougher it must’ve been for her to fine-tune her own.

To sum it all up, unlike most folks, Lefi wasn’t suited for cooking. But the food on the table looked well-made *and* delicious. *Damn, she made an insane amount of progress with her skills in the kitchen.* From the looks of it, my bet was that she’d failed countless times. But Lefi being Lefi, she clearly hadn’t let those failures discourage her from continuing to practice diligently.

“Let me get this straight, then. The reason you stayed behind in the dungeon instead of going to the demon world with us was to do all this for me?”

“Correct. It will soon be one year since our meeting, so I imagined a special banquet would be lovely to mark the day.”

Oh, she’s right. We’re coming up on a year. The seasons didn’t

change in this world, which meant the world outside always looked the same. Obviously, that made it hard to tell the passage of time. *But wow, it's already been a year since I woke up in this world. Since I met Lefi for the first time.*

"I wanted to show you that I, too, have grown during our time together. It would be appropriate to call this a celebration of sorts, I suppose. No matter the case, as your *wife*, I shall henceforth endeavor to aid in the household task— Bwuh?!"

I was so blown away by her awesomeness that I couldn't stop myself from snatching her up and hugging her tight. So I did exactly that, spinning around on the spot with her in my arms. She deserved all the praise in the world for her incredible effort.

"Ahhh! I'm the luckiest man in the world to be blessed with such an adorable wife! Not a chance in hell I'll ever let you go!"

"Wha— S-Stop it this instant! They are all watching us!"

Cheeks flushed from embarrassment, Lefi repeatedly smacked at my arms, demanding that I release her. But I wouldn't. I hadn't missed the emphasis she'd put on the word "wife," which had made another motivation behind her amazing act pop into my head. Even though she was the one who'd had the idea, she must've been anxious about her role in the family now that there was a chance Nell would become a part of it.

You're so stupid. And cute. Like I could ever give up an incredible woman like you. A demon lord was the personification of greed, and once a demon lord got what he wanted, he would never let it go.

"F-Fine! Fine, you have conveyed to me your appreciation, so unhand me at once! B-Besides, the food will get cold!"

"Oops! Can't have that, can we? It'd be a big, fat L if I missed out on your cooking while it's still hot. I'll spin-hug you some more later."

"Or never, for I do not need to experience that again!"

It sucked to have to part with my dearly beloved wife, but it would've sucked even more to let her efforts go to waste, so I gently put her down. Lefi and I started heading toward the table—then we both realized that Nell wasn't following.

"Whatever is the matter, Nell? Come."

"Um... I-I think I'll join you all another time since it's your and Mr. Yuki's one-year anniversary. You can find me at the inn, so—"

"Nonsense. This banquet is also your welcome fete."

"Huh?"

Nell squeaked in surprise, and Lefi shrugged her shoulders in exasperation before admonishing her.

"I cannot deny that, initially, it was all for him."

She knocked on my chest with her small fist before continuing.

"But I deemed it appropriate to host a proper welcome for you

since you will be spending ever more time with us from now on. Now stop lingering there like an immovable post and hasten to us.”

“Yeah, Nell, get a move on and come eat with us, dammit! I’m tired of waiting.”

“O-Okay! Okay, I understand!”

Nell smiled happily at us and raced over. Iluna called out to her while she did.

“Nellie, over here! You can sit next to me and Shii!”

“Next to us!”

“Hee hee, will do. Thanks.”

“Are you confident with chopsticks yet, Nell?”

“I believe I’ll have to practice some more, but it shouldn’t be *too* difficult, right?”



“Hey, when did you two get so friendly?”

“Nell’s like a younger sister to me, so I’ve been teaching her all kinds of things, my lord!”

“Interesting to hear you say that, Lew, when you used to be absolutely terrified of her. Isn’t that right?”

“Th-That’s because I didn’t know what kind of person she was! But now I know she’s a great pup, so we’re all good!”

“Heh. Thanks, Lew.”

“All of you, enough with the chatter. Get to eating now. Yuki, pray lead the toast.”

“Wait, me?”

“Who else? You are the master of this domain, are you not?”

“W-Well, yeah, I guess I am. All right, as you wish. Uh, does everyone have a glass?”

“Yup, we do, Yukiki! ReiRei and her sisters too!”

“Excellent. Then—to the year that’s passed and the year that’s coming. And to our newest dungeon resident. Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

Everyone shouted in unison before the buzz of lively conversation stretched uninterrupted into the night.

Special Story: Everyday Life with a New Family Member

“Lefi, I’ve got a favor to ask.”

“You seem quite serious and it makes me suspicious. But go on, out with it.”

“Please. Don’t say anything. Just make your horns disappear and put this on.”

Lefi automatically accepted what I handed to her.

“Hmm? What... What is this?”

“Cat ears.”

You bet your ass I’d given her a cat-ear headband. It was silver to match her hair and sported luxurious tufts of fur. By the way, I’d bought it on the ever-sinful, ever-mysterious DP Catalog. Naturally.

“Honestly, Yuki, even I can understand by looking at this item that it is an imitation of a cat’s ears. What I would like to know is *why* you are suddenly presenting it to *me*.”

“Okay, so you know how it hasn’t been that long since I got back from the demon world?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Well, I met a certain therianthrope there. A cat person named Naiya.”

“Hmm... En mentioned her.”

Aw, she’s so cute when she’s annoyed. I kept talking while I enjoyed the sight of my peeved wife.

“Mm-hmm. So, when I met her, I thought to myself, ‘Hey, I’m totally gonna get Lefi to wear a cat-ear headband once I get home.’”

“Yuki, though you think you may be explaining yourself clearly, I do not understand at all what you are blathering on about.”

I rested both hands on her shoulders, leaned down real close, and tried my darndest to convince her.

“I... Lefi, here’s the cold, hard truth: I’m a cat person, not a dog person!”

“Oh, er, I see...? At the very least, I can certainly tell you are passionate about the subject considering the unusual force with which you now speak. Hmm, it is fascinating to learn this about you. And yet, amongst your pet summons, Byaku is the only cat. Nor do you particularly show the creature any special treatment despite your claim of a predilection for felines.”

“That’s ‘cause I don’t wanna play favorites with the pets, so I love them equally. Also, thanks to Rir, I like dogs a lot more than I used to, so there’s that too.”

“But cats are number one for you, yes?”

“Yup, cats are my numero uno.”

Let me tell ya, cats’ free-spiritedness charmed me to no end. In that sense, I hated to say it, but Byaku wasn’t catlike at all. My cat summon was incredibly serious and dependable, taking charge of all the pets except Rir. Compared to Byaku, Naiya was the epitome of a freewheeling cat. She was exactly what I wanted in a cat, so I could place the blame for my resurgence of cat love squarely on her. Cats lived freely and demon lords lived however they wished. Definitely some similarity between the two.

In any case, Lefi realized I wasn’t gonna back down on this. She sighed, shaking her head like she thought I was a lost cause.

“Haah... Fine. It seems I have no choice but to acquiesce. Though I suppose satisfying her husband is one facet of a wife’s role.”

Lefi proceeded to adjust her anthropomorphic ability to make her horns disappear before slipping the cat-ear headband on. Then, looking slightly ashamed, she curled her hands into cat paw shapes and posed.

“M-Meow. Does... Does this suit your taste?”

“Whoa... It sure does... This is the friggin’ *best*, Lefi! You’re fifty percent more attractive than usual! Thank you so much! Thank you so, so, so much!”

“Y-You are much more pleased than I could have imagined... Well, um, it is only natural that I would excel at this, for I am the Supreme Dragon, the most powerful creature in history! Nothing is beyond my capabilities!”

I don’t think being the Supreme Dragon is relevant. I kept my mouth shut, though, because I thought it was cute how carried away she was getting. Maybe it was also a way for her to hide her embarrassment.

“Yup, you are indeed the mighty Supreme Dragon. Now that we’re both in agreement, you don’t mind wearing the headband for the rest of the day, right? Cool. Thanks a ton, babe.”

“What?! N-No, I cannot. I would much prefer to remove it before the others return.”

Currently, Lefi and I were the only ones in the real throne room, which was what we used as our everyday living space. The little girls were taking Nell on a tour of the castle, and Lew was tagging along with them because she’d thought it’d be fun. Leila had said she planned to do her daily research in her room, the one used by our maids. Once, I’d asked her what kind of research she did, but all I’d gotten in response was a vague smile. Ever since then, I’d been kinda

afraid to find out the answer, so I'd never asked again.

"That's crazy talk. You can't take off the cat ears—not when you look so amazing in them. It'd be a waste if you did. You look so damn good like this that I want the whole *world* to see you. So, really, you should just keep them on forever."

She ate up my flattery, huffing arrogantly and puffing out her thin chest in pride. *What an easy mark my wife is.*

"Wha— Hmph! Since you insist on showering me with such copious adulation, I shall deign to remain for a time in this cat disguise you so desire!"

"How wonderful! Truly magnificent, Lady Lefi! Additionally, if you would kindly work in some cat puns when you speak, I would be terribly obliged!"

"Understood! As this molly is in a grand mood today, she shall indulge your whims! Be grateful for my tremeowndously generous heart!"

God, she really is too easy. I freaking love it. How much cuter can she get?

"Woow, thank you so much! Here's my next request, Lady Lefi. Please get down on all fours, lift your right hand up to your face, and gimme a 'meow'!"

"Meooow!"

"Yes, exactly! Perfect! There could be no better expression of a cat's sly cuteness! You'll be happy to know that I've thought of another request, my lady! Please make your wings appear and stretch sinuously like cats do!"

"Um... Something like this, purrhaps?!"

"Fantastic! You're as lovely as a painting, Lady Lefi! As ethereal as an angel. Just looking at you sends me straight up to heaven! Next up, please fold your arms and thrust your chin out, posing like a sassy cat!"

"How about this? So fur, so good?!"

"Hmm, not quite what I had in mind."

"Why are you suddenly so cold?!"

While Lefi and I fooled around like idiots, the door connected to the castle opened with a *kachak*.

"We're back, my lord."

"We have return— Oh. I see you two are up to something strange again. Are we interrupting?"

Lew and Nell stepped through the door. The absence of the little-girl gang made me assume they'd gone to play outside after the castle tour was over.

"Oh, hey, welcome back. How was the castle?"

Nell responded with a wry smile.

“It was amazing, honestly. I found myself quite excited as I wandered around. But it really is too big, you know. Not to mention the lack of anything inside.”

“This tomcat is a nitwit, so he does not tend to think ahead.”

“Look, the only reason it’s empty inside is because the interior is still under construction, okay? I have every intention of hunkering down to finish it soon, no matter how long it takes. So, Nell, if you have any requests, let me know and I’ll do my best to make a room just the way you want. Sound good?”

“Y-Yes, thank you. That aside, Lefi, what I’d really like to know is why you’re acting like this.”

“Because he refused to take no for an answer! So meow I am passing the time as a feline therianthrope!”

Nell smiled awkwardly at Lefi, who was posing like a triumphant cat.

“Interesting. I truly believed I was adjusting to life here, but it turns out I was wrong.”

At that moment, I noticed Lew, frozen in place.

“What’s up, Lew? You look like a doofus just standing there.”

“Are you feline fine, Lew?”

“N-No way, my lord... D-Does this mean...you prefer cat ears over mine?!”

She grabbed both of my shoulders and dragged my face down so it was right in front of hers. She looked totally devastated.

“H-Hey, calm down, will ya? No need to wind yourself up, ’cause your dog ears are awesome too.”

“B-But my identity will disappear if I wear those!”

Whoa, is her identity that wrapped up in her ears? Homegirl needed to get her priorities straight.

“Damn, you poor thing... Okay, Lew, listen to me carefully. ‘Do not hate your rival. Be grateful to them and instead hone yourself!’”

“Wh-Whaaat?!”

When I jabbed my finger at her as I shared that little nugget of wisdom, she gasped dramatically and took a few steps back in amazement. I really liked this part of her, the one that always gave me the reactions I wanted.

“‘Hate does not produce ambition. Thus, one must appreciate their rivals and use that energy to fuel their own growth.’ That’s what the saying means. They’re the words of a very important historical figure. Maybe. Don’t quote me on that.”

“I-I see. It’s full of meaning, isn’t it? Wait, what? Did you say ‘maybe,’ my lord?”

I ignored Lew’s startled glance and kept going. I was on a roll, okay?

“So there you have it. Your dog ears are superb, but you mustn’t rest on your laurels. Rather, endeavor to polish your charm and make it so that your dog ears are the only ones I’m entranced by!”

“Aye, aye! I’ve been too conceited until now! So I’ll devote myself to seducing you and everyone else in the dungeon with these ears! Just you wait, my lord! You’ll see!”

Lew pumped her fist in a show of strong determination. With a, “Yes, mm-hmm,” I nodded deeply, pleased by her resolve.

“I like your spirit, Lew. Rest assured, I’ll watch over you as you strive toward your goal. Here, this is for you. Use it as encouragement in your studies.”

“Um, my lord? If I put this on, I’ll have four ears, you know...”

I’d given her a brown cat-ear headband. It was hard to put her expression into words as she mumbled in protest. *No big deal, O maid of mine. Anyone who puts it on ends up having four ears.* I knew she hadn’t meant it like that since she was kind of a ditz, but I didn’t say it out loud. *Hey, even I know when to keep my mouth shut!*

“Come, Nell. This is a purrfect—I mean, a perfect opportunity for you to entice this imbecile yourself. Evidently, he prefers cats more than any of us can even imagine. You may use this to pretend to be a cat however you see fit.”

“Wh-Whaaat?!”

Nell had been standing next to us while Lew and I did our bit. After reflexively accepting the cat-ear headband from Lefi, it was *her* turn to freeze in shock.

“Lefi, wait!”

“Why? I did my part in playing a cat, so can I not seek respite from the position?”

“No, what I mean is that that one is specifically for you. *This* one is Nell’s.”

While I spoke, I pulled another cat-ear headband—this time a black one—from Inventory. Lefi gave me the stink eye as she watched.

“You scoundrel... Bah, I waste my breath talking sense into you at this point. Well, you heard him, Nell.”

“Urk... O-Okay, okay. I’ll try my best, so stop pleading with me with those eyes, Mr. Yuki...”

“Woo-hoo! Hell to the yes!”

No one can resist these puppy-dog eyes. Nell hesitated for a second when she took the new headband from me, but she shook off her reservations with an assertive shout and shoved it onto her head.

“M-Meow! I’m a kitty cat, meow!”

Nice. Very, very nice. Her blushing face and blatant embarrassment made the earnestness of her performance that much better.

“S-So, is this acceptable, meow? I sure hope so, because I

suddenly have a strong urge to cry, meow.”

“I certainly think you are doing a fine job. Yuki, praise her.”

“I’m filled with emotion. Absolutely captivated...”

“Yikes! I’ve never seen *that* expression on your face before, Mr. Yuki...”

“My lord, you’re sillier than usual today. I beg your pardon, but I’d even say you’ve gone a little off the deep end. I’m getting an awfully strange energy from you...”

Nell and Lew looked kinda turned off as they watched intense, passionate shudders wrack my whole body.

“Nell, a word of advice. I suggest you remember it well. At his core, this man is an imbecile, but when he thinks of foolish ideas, he becomes even *more* of an imbecile. If you truly intend to stay with us henceforth, you had best get used to this fact quickly.”

“I fully agree with my lady on that count.”

“G-Got it, meo—I mean, got it. Understood.”

Rude. So rude. How was it my fault that witnessing such incredible sights made my heart tremble?

“Mm, you poor, lost souls. You still don’t understand the wonder of cat ears. I just want you all to know that I feel sorry for you.”

“As you can see, he is also prone to self-indulgent flights of fancy. When he becomes like this, entering his own little world, nothing we say can penetrate his thick skull, so it is best to just brush him off or humor him.”

“My lord gets like this when he creates stuff too.”

Um, would you guys stop analyzing me so coldly, please? While we joked around, the door connected to the castle opened once more.

“We’re hooome! Oh! Are you playing make-believe as cats?!”

“Kitty cats!”

“Hmm... Naiya’s ears.”

“Hey, hey. Welcome back. Heh heh heh, you ladies wanna play cat too?”

I pulled out three new cat-ear headbands from Inventory for the little-girl gang. I’d bought enough for everyone in my dungeon. Everyone besides me, of course. Demon lords had to be ready for anything, y’know? Shii could transform her body at will, so she technically didn’t need one, but I would’ve felt bad if I hadn’t bought one for her. Didn’t wanna leave her out or anything.

“We dooo! Then you’re the mouse, Yukiki! We’re gonna chase you since we’re cats!”

“Mouse hunting!”

“Huh...? How do I wear this?”

“Oh, I’ll put it on you. Gimme just a second here, and... Okay, all set! Mwa ha ha! Pursue me if you dare, tiny kittens! For I am the

demon lord known as the Great Rat King! Soon, you will learn that catching me is no simple feat!”

Lefi and Nell watched Yuki start playing with the little girls. The hero giggled as she spoke.

“It was nice having just us girls here until Mr. Yuki returned. But he really does liven the atmosphere, hm? Is he always like this?”

“Indeed he is. Very boisterous, no?”

“Yup... I don’t mind it at all.”

Lefi grinned in response to Nell’s words.

“Then you shall fit into this madhouse swimmingly, especially since I suspect you will stay for a long, long time. Although I am certain that imbecile will drive us to the brink of insanity, let us support our man to the best of our abilities regardless.”

“You’re absolutely right. I might rely on you a lot because there’s still so much I don’t know about both this dungeon and Mr. Yuki, so thank you in advance, teacher.”

“Gah ha! You can count on me. After all, I have lived here the longest. Come to me for anything you may need, fledgling.”

Nell bowed her head slightly and Lefi nodded cheerfully. Then, they looked at each other and burst out laughing.



Afterword

Hello, this is Ryuyu. Thank you very much for buying volume 5! I have a feeling I wrote something like this last time too, but we're already at five volumes. Five! And that's thanks entirely to the readers. I'm so grateful to you all from the bottom of my heart.

Right, then, for the first time ever, I'd like to provide an extended commentary like a real author would. I want to start off by writing about the dungeon's newest resident, the young hero, Nell. She's also one of the protagonists of this volume. As a hero, Nell's position is the antithesis of a demon lord's. But why does she fight as a hero? How strong are her will and determination? I wanted to explore these parts of her.

Not much time has passed since she began working as a hero. Yet she herself is deeply aware of the fact that she *is* a hero, and she acts accordingly. So much so that she puts her life on the line. In the same way Yuki is unwavering in his actions because he's a demon lord, she believes in her power as a hero to save the lives of others.

And lastly, in this volume, Yuki and Nell affirm their feelings for each other, essentially establishing a romantic relationship. Yuki's attitude can be described as carefree at best and selfish at worst. But however one chooses to think of it, it left an incredibly powerful impression on Nell. Despite being astounded and exasperated by him at times, she still admires him, pines for him, and is influenced by him to some extent.

As far as Lefi's concerned, I would say she resembles Yuki in terms of sensibilities and personality. Nell, on the other hand, is Yuki's exact opposite, and I believe this is exactly what attracts them to each other—people naturally seek in others what they themselves lack. So please look forward to how Yuki and Nell's relationship develops moving forward.

There's one more person from this volume I'd like to discuss: Gozim, the leader of the fiends. Yuki and Gozim's fight ended halfway through on a dissatisfying note, to say the least. There was no resolution whatsoever. I have a good reason for this and don't want to spoil it, but I will say that Gozim is an incredibly important villain in this story and he'll reappear to fulfill his role soon enough.

In short, you can think of his introduction in this volume as his debut. Since I have bigger plans for him, it would have been a bit

awkward if Yuki defeated him so easily right out of the gate (LOL). How did he become front and center as the leader of the fiends? What is his end goal in taking control of the demon world? I definitely plan on delving into these questions and more in the future. Though I can't tell you the exact details, rest assured that I have every intention of writing about Yuki and Gozim's final showdown, so please be patient.

To wind down, I realize the story took a bit of a serious turn in this volume, but I hope to make the next volume much more fun! Especially now that the dungeon has added the hero as a resident. More people means I can now write even livelier stories about their daily lives! Besides, I think I'm much better at writing lighthearted stories! I love to create relaxed, peaceful episodes to soothe everyone from the stresses of their everyday lives!

Lastly, I'd like to end with acknowledgments. To my editor, who toiled every day revising my many annoying mistakes. To Daburyu, whose divine illustrations never fail to make me smile. To Note Tono, who's doing a fantastic job with the comic adaptation. And to everyone else involved in the production of this work and the readers who picked this book up. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you all.

Please look forward to everyone's rowdy dungeon life!

Using the Transformation Ring,
I changed my black hair and heterochromatic red
and black eyes all to silver.

"Uhhh... Well,
um, I can
explain, okay?
My mind just
associated
silver with
flashy. I-I
wasn't even
thinking
about Lefi!"

The Young Man
Reborn in Another World
As a Demon Lord

Yuki



Now I'm a
DEMON LORD!
Happily Ever After with
Monster Girls
in My **DUNGEON**

5

"I just
couldn't
help thinking
that you're
now truly a
matching pair
with Lady
Lefi."

Of the
Ovine Race

Leila



A full-page illustration of the character Hero Nell. She is a young woman with short, dark, spiky hair and a determined, slightly angry expression. She is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt under a red vest, black gloves, and red pants with a black belt. She is holding a sword with a purple blade and a silver hilt. The background is a swirling, ethereal purple and white energy field with small red sparks or petals floating around. The character is positioned in the center, slightly to the right, with her body angled towards the viewer.

I'd
rather
die here
fighting
than join
forces
with the
likes of
you!"

Hero
Nell

"Here's
my answer
to your
invitation!
I politely
decline!"

Now I'm a
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Author: Ryuyu

Illustrator: Daburyu

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Now I'm a Demon Lord! Happily Ever After with Monster Girls in
My Dungeon: Volume 5
by Ryuyu

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